

Stray From The Path, 'Internal Atomics,' and a invite to change the world

By **Murjani Rawls** - Nov 1, 2019



One of the best things that a person can do is look at situations from another person's perspective. You'll find that a lot of things aren't what they seemed and two experiences aren't alike. It will lead to a greater standing of one another and hopefully, greater showcases of empathy for our afflictions.

Internal Atomics is album number nine for stories hardcore band. Stray From The Path. A visit to Kenya in 2018 forever changed the band's outlook on the world and became the crux of the story of their new record. Still setting out to challenge perspectives and speaking truth to power, the band also wants to include the listener on this as well. Every little bit helps and even a small change is impactful. This album also sees the band pushing themselves musically to one of their accomplished bodies of work to date. I spoke with guitarist Thomas Williams about his life-changing trip to Kenya and how that DNA found itself in the message of the band's newest album.

When you listen to *Internal Atomics*, the message of the album is a lot broader in scale. There is a lot of craziness going on all over the world and a lot of this album's perspective is shaped by the band's visit to Kenya in 2018. I feel like anybody in the world from the U.S. to Britain can take this something from the universal feeling from this record. Talk about the trip and what you've learned and seen.

That was definitely the biggest one because I think it kind of opened up the perspective of not only what it's like in Africa compared to America, but what it's like really everywhere. With this band, we feel pretty fortunate that we get to travel the entire world. We've been to anywhere between 40 and 50 countries. There's a contrast. You get to see some of the lowest points of like societies as humans in America and over in Africa. Then you see the highest in Japan.

Why this trip was so eye-opening to us is that we've seen some of the most extreme conditions over there. When people don't have clean water to drink. People don't go to school or go to work because they have to dig through the garbage to find food. Often that food water and food that they do find will make them sick. So even if they do have time to go to work or to have an education there, they can't because they get sick. The roads are almost undrivable. It's things that the majority of the people in the world don't experience. We got to experience that ourselves. Three of us from Long Island, New York and one of them from Reading, England.

Honestly, at the end of the day, like, most of the people we met in Africa, we're absolutely happy. They didn't know anything was better outside of what they already had. So it was We were witnessing the people that have the worst conditions we've ever seen in the world, and they're happy. We went there with Hardcore Help Foundation and actually got words to foundations that are helping people out in Kenya. With Hardcore Help Foundation and Actions Not Words, these people drop everything in their lives to give back to the people there. That was very inspiring to us.

We think that as a band and our individual gifts is that we want to go out there and play music. Music that got us out there on the road. As we grew up in the world, we found that it's our job to go and educate people based on our experience. I am proud of what we do, but I think prior to Kenya, we kind of looked at it as like we were some important, save the world, messiah kind of thing. We were out here with the people that have dropped their lives so that they could give

wheelchairs to people who need it. To put kids in boarding schools so they can have friends, clean water, and food. They are the real fucking deal.

I think there's a lot of people that were like us where they thought that they were doing something like it was the end-all-be-all thing. It goes much further than that. After we went to Africa we found out if we want to start to change this world, it honestly starts with considering that people don't have what we are lucky to have. I woke up today in a hotel room, drinking tea, as a musician for a living. While it's not easy to do that, it's also not hard. I'm with my friends and we're playing fucking music for a living. There are people that have woke up, not in a bed not and digging through garbage to find food.

To me, I want people to understand things beyond their immediate lives you that they get caught up in. I live and breathe this band every day. There are people that need help and we just want not even just people, but ourselves as well to realize that people don't have what we had. That we are lucky. Honestly, I think when you start to realize that people don't have what you have, you can start to do anything extra to kind of help out people so that they have a fair shot at living. That's a good start.

I wanted to go off of that because there was a particular song that kind of like spoke to me. "Something In The Water" is basically speaking to the numbness that's permeated when negative things happen. Our empathy and overall care for each other has been diluted a bit and this song speaks to that.

We noticed that when we were in the studio and it was like another mass shooting. Someone was like "there was another mass shooting at fill in the blank" and then it was like, oh ok. You know what I mean? Wait a second, why did I just not finish it? It's because it's so common now. We went from not caring at all because again, it's just so common in our country to being like, "Holy fuck!" like I was just completely numb to the fact that someone that there was a mass shooting.

That's what sparked that. Now it's made its way to people like us that care about what's happening and care about people. There's just so much going on like that and no intuition about it. We were like you said, numb. That's like I think people don't care about people in Africa

or even care about people in their own country. People will vote on legislation that's sometimes against themselves.

With "Something In The Water," it's like something is going around and even made its way to us. There was a mass shooting in New Zealand and then the next day, the prime minister shut everything down and addressed it. Here, it's just one after another. It's like, where does it stop?

***Internal Atomics* starts off with "Ringleader," and there's a phrase that starts the album. "Thinking like everyone else is not really thinking." It dovetails into the last track where everybody makes a choice for themselves. "we gave them a stage but we can tear it down" is another key lyric. Misinformation is at an all-time high, so I felt like this was a powerful message to start the album. Do more research on things and don't take everything at face value.**

Yeah, exactly that. People are just taking what they see as truth. Just right off the top of the bat, you know what I mean? A lot of people are guilty of that. A lot of like older people. I think we particularly wanted to write a song about this, but as we started like tackling topics that we wanted to do, it just felt not as important as others. We wanted to write a song about how there is no actual slide here with clickbait. It's going to get traffic on websites and they're cashing in on far left people and far-right people.

It's just an endless war and honestly, at the end of the day, these companies are making money off it. They don't care. The crazier our country is, the more they'll do it. As you said, that opening line is pretty important because it's the state of things.

We touched on older generations and the band speaks about that in "The First Will Be Last." Speaking on how younger generations feel that older people are taking and not really giving anything back. The song reminded me of the line in "The Ghost of Tom Joad." You look at things around the world where younger people are protesting and looking to change the status quo because it's not necessarily beneficial to their futures.

I think it all just goes with our experience and what we've seen and growing up. I even look back at like our records where we songs like "Black Anchor," which was about oil prices. We wrote that because the oil prices were killing us and our opportunity to be in a band. Some of those expenses and losing a lot of money from that. We started getting open to stuff that's at 21 years

old where we didn't really know yet and still learning about things. Then we go to today where we have bigger perspective of seeing more of the world.

That's why I want people to travel, There was someone I know that was close to me that was I don't want to say is conservative, but they just don't know any better. They know what they see off Barstool Sports. It's not a news source. It's a thing for funny videos run by guys that have money that are all white males. That's their knowledge of the world. That person, in particular, started traveling the world and they came back to the US and said, "you know what man. It definitely changes your perspective on your country and what people value here."

A lot of our perspectives changed with traveling. We go somewhere like Japan which is one of our favorite places in the world to go where there isn't a heavy police presence. They aren't carrying assault weapons and most of the society is looking out for each other. It's all about quality, not quantity. On the flip side, a lot of things here are based on excessive force. Quantity over quality, how cheap can I get it, and how much can I sell it for.

How was linking up with Will Putney on the production side again? I know the band has a rapport with him with the previous four records, but you all managed to push yourself musically on this record further than anything you did before.

With Will, that's our guy. That's who we're going to be doing our records with. I don't see that changing. He's one of my closest friends. One of all of our closest friends and a brother to us. He just gets it. We don't have to even talk about it. We just go in there and we know what we're doing. Even with the singles like "Fortune Teller," "Kickback," and "Actions Not Words," those were the three songs that we wrote in the studio with Will. Everything else, we went in with prepared already. Honestly, I think we wrote "Fortune Teller" in 30 minutes. We wrote "Actions Not Words" in an hour.

It's not because it's easy. It's just because we're just on a level with him where it just flows so naturally. We're lucky because there are a lot of bands that are on their seventh or eighth producer and they can't get into a groove. We did a record with Kurt Ballou in 2007. Obviously, Converge is my favorite hardcore band ever if you can't tell in our fucking music. Going into that was an experience, but you know, as an 18 or 19-year old kid, it was intimidating. It just didn't feel right.

We made our *Make Your Own History* with Misha from Periphery. I'm proud of that record too, but it wasn't there. Then, we did the next record with Will and there's a reason why we went with him five times in a row. He brings out the best of us and knows what we're going for. I'm kind of all over the place and he helps wrangle me in, but still makes the process fun. At the end of the day, you want to make music that people enjoy listening to and not sound like they're going to history class.

He helps put it in a way where it works on a broader scale. We're starting to see that with this new album. You mentioned it being broader and I look at it that way. Maybe broader could be looked at as an odd term. It's not let's make it broad so that we don't have to try as hard. I heard 'Bulls On Parade' by Rage Against the Machine when I was 13 and that's what got me into doing what I'm doing. I didn't know what the fuck Zack was talking about when I was 13. I probably found out when I was 20.

I think that's because it's a broad thing. It's just awesome and cool. "Riding round the family with a pocket full of shells." I didn't know what "war cannibal animal" when I was 15. Then you find out and you just "damn, that's sick." I think that's the kind the approach we had to it. "Fortune Teller" touches on the Boomer mentality. Instead of making a song that is saying here's how they fucked us, it's more of "let's do this together." There's a lot of hopeful people out there. That's where 'fire walk with me' comes from. We wanted to make it like a crusade and not a polarizing thing. We want people to be in it with us, you know? We get a lot of that from Will and we'll get a lot of it from us, He's like a band member now.

"Kickback" and that chorus riff. It's infectious. It's one of my favorite parts of the album musically.

How did you come up with that?

So, the verse riff of that song, I would literally check my guitar with that riff. I checked my guitar with that at a live show. Probably for three years straight. One day, I was playing it and then Craig was checking to make sure the levels were ok. He just jumped in with it and I was like "god damn, that was fucking sick!" We honestly wrote that song at a soundcheck. It just kind of kept growing. We had the chorus and verses that we just started doing on the road.

I wanted to add a lot more like lower octave throughout the record because I felt that definitely gave us kind of heaviness to it that we've never done before. Every record we've done is in drop c. Not that it started to feel stale to me, but I just thought that if we use it three or four times

throughout the whole record. Give things different moments and space. The chorus of that song is different for us. The end of that song, that was like the bending behind the neck, Meshuggah trick. Just trying to do different things. Musically, that's my favorite song or one of my favorite songs on the record.

The album ends with "Actions Not Words." We gave you all these reasons why we should you should be in the fight with us. Now, what are you going to do? We laid the musical and lyrical groundwork to get the adrenaline to go make these changes. I like that the band gives that choice. You can come with us on the journey that we are still on to change the world for the better.

Yeah, and honestly, it's a statement toward us, too. That knock on the door to me was Africa. The almost story arc of that trip. Getting there, playing a show, distributing water filters to people and them being so appreciative. Going into a village in and walking through the dump where a thousand people live where their homes are made of garbage. Walking ankle in pig shit. It's something that you've never experienced in your life.

Then, going to the schools and meeting the kids. These kids were absolutely warming up to us. Hugging us and touching our tattoos. Giving metal horns. They were so happy.

We were there with our booking agent from Europe. he walked through all of that with us. He sponsored a kid with Actions Not Words. We went to the school where he was going to surprise her and we watched her run into his arms. They were both weeping. We were just like "god damn, we were meant to come here. We were meant to experience all this."

I myself foster a kid. Her name is Robin and she's doing better right now. We just want to start looking out for people. The little gestures you can do to really help with their state of mind and how they live. Even yesterday, we played a venue in Portland and there was this guy who was being a dick to everybody. Instead of my New York brain where I would go "fuck off," it goes to "man, this dude probably has been through some shit." He probably hasn't been smiled at or hugged for anything ever.

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe because people are doing something so little like that. It starts with you. I hope people can hear it and I hope people can read these interviews and check out the kind of things we got going on and our experiences. People might dislike it and people are going to love it. People may not know what we're talking about at all. Like I said, with 'Bulls On

Parade,' I didn't know what that was. But now I do. That changed my life. I hope that we can do that in the future for other people. Whether they do it today or they do it in five or ten years. We're going to do our best and we're going to travel the world and spread what we have to talk about.

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Journalist, Self-published author of five books, and photographer since 2014, Murjani "MJ" Rawls has been stretching his capabilities of his creativity and passions, Rawls has as a portfolio spanning through many mediums including music, television, movies, and more. Operating out of the New York area, Rawls has photographed over 200+ artists spanning many genres, written over 600 articles ranging displaying his passionate aspirations to keep evolving as his years in media continue.

