

ARTICLE

Animator-turned-musician Jhariah discovers freedom in his own ideas

Nathan Ansell
August 18, 2022



(Photos: Nathan Ansell)

2,800 miles from home, Jhariah is seconds away from the opener of his first West Coast concert at San Diego's Ché Café. In true DIY fashion, it's cramped and oppressively humid, but this is his element, on stage, clutching the piano bench, glancing at a graffiti portrait of the eponymous Marxist leader next to the ticket booth. He's dealt with much worse.

All of a sudden, there's an ear-splitting noise. A series of agonizing shrieks emits from the far left speaker. Jhariah, despite being feet away, merely laughs. "Nothing bad ever happens on the Bad Luck Tour," he quips.

In reality, the aptly named tour has faced a gauntlet of obstacles, from van repairs and passport issues to requiring donations to get on the road and replacing band members between stops. He had only communicated with his latest guitarist via text until 48 hours before the California shows, and his drummer started the tour as a driver and merch vendor. Nevertheless, to him, the opportunity to travel with a full band for the first time has been a "crazy, gratifying experience."

Born and raised in New York City, Jhariah's musical identity remains somewhat influenced by the emphatic hip hop and Latin sounds etched into Bronx culture. His first attempts in the artistic realm, however, were more visual. Jhariah started drawing when he was four as a method to express abstract ideas and an excuse to observe the world. He would eventually attend Brooklyn's Pratt Institute with plans of becoming a full-time digital illustrator.

"I would see things and just try to put them on paper to understand them in my little brain," Jhariah says. "They just naturally crossed over once I started to develop this sense for music and for sound, and it always naturally evoked images for me."

Jhariah takes pride in maintaining an impossible-to-categorize style — as his Twitter bio proudly proclaims, "NO GENRE, ALL DRAMA." His distinctive approach to indie-pop includes clear elements of emo and alt-rock, but also grand electronic overtures and nods to a theater kid background.

At Pratt, Jhariah met producer and drummer Cole Raser during a jam session at a non-denominational chapel, and the two bonded over shared favorite artists. When Jhariah suggested he needed an engineer and sent a modest handful of his songs, Raser emailed back with their own mixes. The relationship blossomed into a multi-year collaborative partnership.

The two tweaked Jhariah's 2018 debut album, *The Great Tale of How I Ruined It All*, for months. Raser was on board with the multiple narrators and revenge themes that conceptually defined the project, but they weren't subtle on how they felt about the levels. After spending so much time on a narrative he had conceived before the two had even met, Jhariah felt an initial supernova of creative energy the moment it was completed, beginning work on his sophomore LP right away.

He burnt out almost before he got started, tired of confining himself within the new world he was initially so eager to explore. Jhariah decided to temporarily shelf the demandingly ambitious ideas and decided to work on an EP, this time without as much narrative media inspiration. Overwhelmed by simultaneously attending Pratt, trying to launch a full-time music career and existing as a person, he pondered what a fresh beginning would look like, eventually crafting a story about a Ned's Declassified-style guide of the ultimate restart: faking your death.



"The idea for that, funnily enough, was right before the pandemic," Jhariah says. "I had often wondered what it would be like if I could just detach from all of it and start over, and there would be no rules. That idea was just very enticing."

Without the pressures of writing for the sake of live performance, the EP that resulted, *A BEGINNER GUIDE TO FAKING YOUR DEATH*, turned increasingly personal as Jhariah recorded each song. From the sometimes breakneck "PRESSURE BOMB 3?!?!" and "BAD LUCK!," sensorially overstimulating tracks that mockingly reject the notion of consistent tempo and volume, to the symphonious climax of the project, "Flight of the Crows," he was fighting the self-imposed challenge of stringing together a linear narrative using songs whose production timelines ebbed and flowed.

At the same time, *BEGINNER'S GUIDE* was a catalyst for tapping back into his earliest creative avenue. Jhariah decided to release a series of animated music and lyric videos for his latest songs, including one in the style of an anime opening for "DEBT COLLECTOR." One of the reasons he had pivoted away from animation in the first place was coming to terms with the artistic burden of visualizing external projects as a studio worker or freelancer. Now, fully in the driver's seat, recommitting to his illustrative roots was infinitely more appealing.

"When you have those skills, you end up naturally being in the position of capturing other people's ideas," Jhariah says. "More than anything, I just wanted to be able to express myself."

When it came time to perform *BEGINNER'S GUIDE* for live audiences, Jhariah was still navigating through a whirlwind of unforeseen circumstances. Despite recovering from COVID-19 and still finishing his Pratt degree during his first two tours, the Bad Luck Tour was even more challenging, and it almost didn't even start. Days before his first show, he tweeted that his van was in need of repairs and he was in danger of missing his first sellouts beyond the East Coast. His next tweet, several hours and over 100 donations later, had a more thankful tone.

"All of the logistics, so much money had already gone into it, it was kind of this Hail Mary play to see what could happen," Jhariah says. "I've been very grateful to have a lot of people surrounding me, people that support what I'm trying to do."



The tour personnel itself has been ever-changing. Jhariah credits Twitter and his personal Discord server, which he uses for virtual release parties, with finding many of his friends, bandmates and friends-turned-bandmates. It's his Gen Z-friendly method of turning fledgling concert-goers and casual listeners into more seriously invested superfans, the same way he credits community-oriented encounters as the gateway to his "embarrassing" number of fandoms. In a strange way, Jhariah says social media has also helped with orienting himself to locate inspiration outside of his favorite groups — he'll profess his admiration for "My Chemical Romance" frontman Gerard Way to anyone within earshot (especially when he's about to cover "House of Wolves" during a set), but Way isn't the type of person to have a TikTok account.

Speaking after the San Diego show, drummer Mike Dallara admits he only met Jhariah two days before, exchanging texts in lieu of an audition. "I didn't even get to play the drums before I came out here," Dallara says. "He basically just saw my [Instagram] videos and was

like, 'You'll do.'" Bassist Robbie Roe, a decade-long touring veteran, claims Jhariah's audience skews the youngest they've ever seen, a natural result of wielding these platforms to cultivate a fanbase.

"During the pandemic, a lot of younger folks weren't able to go out to their first shows," Roe says. "I feel like we're getting a lot of those people [for whom] this is their first entryway to live music and rock music, which is very cool and very wholesome."

When last-minute passport issues prevented Raser from traveling to Canada for a first-ever international gig in July, Jhariah once again went online for a solution.

"The conversations happened so fast, from discussing logistics and figuring out what it looked like to being like, 'See you tomorrow,'" Jhariah says. "We get to Toronto, and they show up and absolutely kill it. I don't know how, they only practiced the songs the day of [the show]."

Eventually, Jhariah cut ties completely with Raser before the tour was finished. Although both declined to comment on the situation, Jhariah released a statement saying he hoped the move would make his music "safer and more sustainable for everyone involved."

Now back in the Bronx, Jhariah is a king-size bed and refrigerator away from turning his studio into a second home. His newest album, which he refers to only as "LP2," is set to release in the summer. He calls it the most ambitious thing he's ever done, beyond the scope of his dual musician and illustrator careers.

"A lot of it is going to be exploring the person I am and the environment that I've grown up in and just trying to figure out who and what Jhariah is," Jhariah says. "This is who I am to the world. We'll see what happens, but that's the goal."
