



Coat, blazer, trousers, & loafers **Gucci**

BØRNS is my musical antidote to my hashtag fatigued, Russia Investigation, political shit show that is 2018, and friends, we have another four months to go. It isn't so much his singing as how he uses his voice; like an instrument that scales with the confidence of an opera singer, then wraps around the lyrics with the tenderness of a lover and delights with the playfulness of a child. Then there's his look, fans have called him a genderless being but that seems to stem from his willingness to dress in clothing that neither reads feminine nor masculine. The clothes—he pulls off a mashup of funky elegance. The way he moves screams “weird and wonderful,” not unlike his 2015 SXSW cover of Elton John's Bennie and the Jets. And yes, he does, as he told me, “make electric music, solid walls of sound,” but unlike anything reminiscent of Phil Spector who used his wall as a buffer to what he considered suboptimal music. No one hides behind a note in a BØRNS' song.

Don't put BØRNS in a box, his musical style defies the garbage pail diagnosis of Indie Pop. He counts Freddie Mercury, David Bowie, and Elvis, as early influences. The solo artist grew up in Michigan helping his mom cook while listening to Earth Wind & Fire and the Bee Gees, “lots of disco dance-y stuff while chopping onions.” His father, an advertising executive, helped him with branding his first career as a child magician. BØRNS's comfort performing feels far more sophisticated than a 26-year-old who has been in the music scene only a few years.

Check out his latest album, Blue Madonna. I've listened to it multiple times and just when I thought okay, the first three songs jammed, “We Don't Care” triggered a musical catalogue flashback with influences of 1960s psychedelic, more than a pinch of glam, and I swear I heard a sitar resonating against a backbeat that makes a rock song truly roll, balanced with dance music that kind of harkens eighties. I chatted on the phone with BØRNS. He sat outside his studio drinking an espresso in L.A. while I was escaping the sticky New York humidity. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Naturnal BØRNS Singer

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Written by Jennifer Parker



On what was playing in his house when he was a kid

I just remember a lot of kind of dance-y stuff like Earth Wind & Fire and the Bee Gees. My folks loved music that you could dance and cook to. I just remember music was always playing when my mom was cooking, and she would make me help chop onions to disco tunes. I just have a vivid memory of that. And then on the other side of the spectrum there was like Elton John and The Beach Boys and Elvis. And those artists got me playing piano and figuring out how chord structures work and how pop songs are written. That was kind of my early kind of education with songwriting.

On formal training

Yeah, I studied with my piano teacher, Yvonne Kurtz for a bit. And she was kind of the first piano teacher to understand me, because I was pretty scatterbrained when it came to actually learning repertoire, and she knew that I liked kind of mixing up songs and kind of making them my own. So, she would give me really interesting [Erik] Satie pieces and I would learn Queen songs, because Freddie Mercury was a really amazing pianist. And his songs are very musically complex.

On discovering he could sing

I never really considered myself a singer, I just kind of did it because it was fun. I had a basement band with some of my friends in middle school, and I just played drums. I bought my own drum kit and assembled it, and I was the drummer of the band. But then when we were making demos, nobody sang, so I just sang on some of them. A little bit later, I met this opera singer named Carlos Sisi, and he taught me more classical warm-ups and how to sing from ... like, using your diaphragm and things that I never really thought of. So, he really opened my eyes to how to project your voice and how to really use your entire body to sing, not just your vocal chords. Yeah, that taught me a lot. I still do those warmups occasionally. They really help with performing onstage.

On putting it all together

I play the instruments and write the lyrics and melodies. But, it's a collaboration with my good friend Tommy English who's an incredible producer. He makes it all come to life. He plays instruments on the album too. We're just really good friends, it never feels like work. You know?

On the making of Holy Ghost

Yeah. That was scored by my music director Kris Poole, because there were these old videos I think in the seventies of the singer Colin Blunstone, who's in The Zombies. He did these performances with a quartet and I just loved the way a single voice sounded just with strings. Only strings. I really wanted to replicate that. Kris Pooley, I just kind of sent him some references and he scored that. I guess when it comes to the kind of broken down sessions and stuff or anything like that I work with outside people, but Chris is unbelievable.

On living a life of creativity

Yeah. I think at a pretty young age I kind of told myself that I was gonna figure out a way to support myself creatively, because I knew it would be a challenge and otherwise I'd just be really bored, I think. Especially the place that I grew up in. I definitely didn't really ... I sought a lot of artistic solitude, I guess. I made a lot of my own clothes and just making music and everything. I think it has manifested exactly how I wanted it when I was 10 years old. I wanted to be able to just dress up in a different character, and travel, and perform in some capacity. I'm kind of living out those fantasies.

On being a child magician

Just talking to people. Talking to strangers and being able to perform just for people ... Some people just didn't want to see it and they're just like, "Go away kid. I don't know what you're doing." Some people really loved it, some people really enjoyed it, and I made a lot of tips.

When you can figure out the secret of talking to people and making a connection, I think that taught me a lot. There were some nights that were really tough for me. I remember just being kind of torn down sometimes, because ... I don't think people realize what they're doing, but sometimes they can just be rude and disregard a young magician. But, it ultimately kind of taught me how to be a front man and how to not let certain energies infiltrate me.

On who he is and what he's here to do

I'm a fresh water boy, I came from the sand dunes of Michigan. Yeah. Just here to create some celestial rock and roll.

Amen.