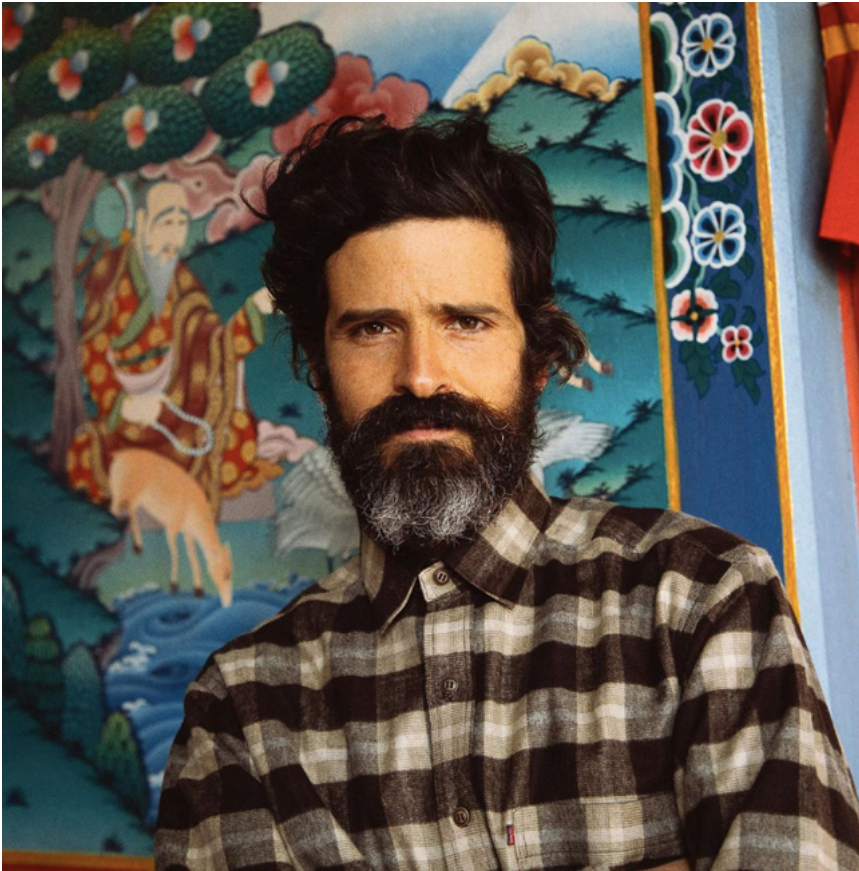
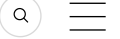


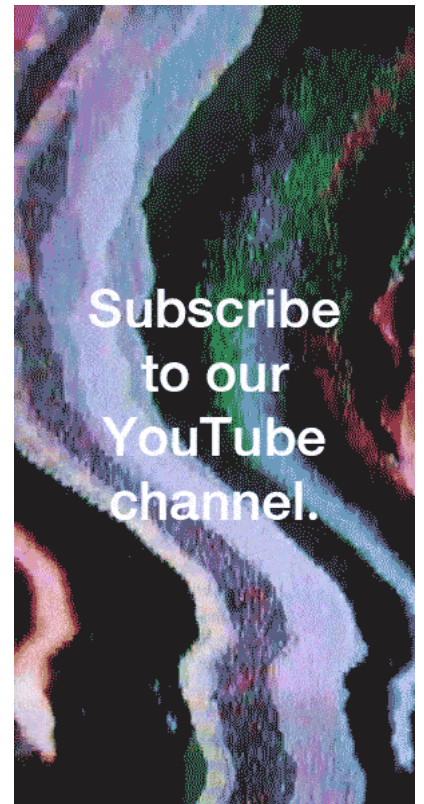
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CULTURE | MUSIC

Devendra Banhart on his new album Ma, his debut poetry book, and finding peace through Buddhism

Into the light

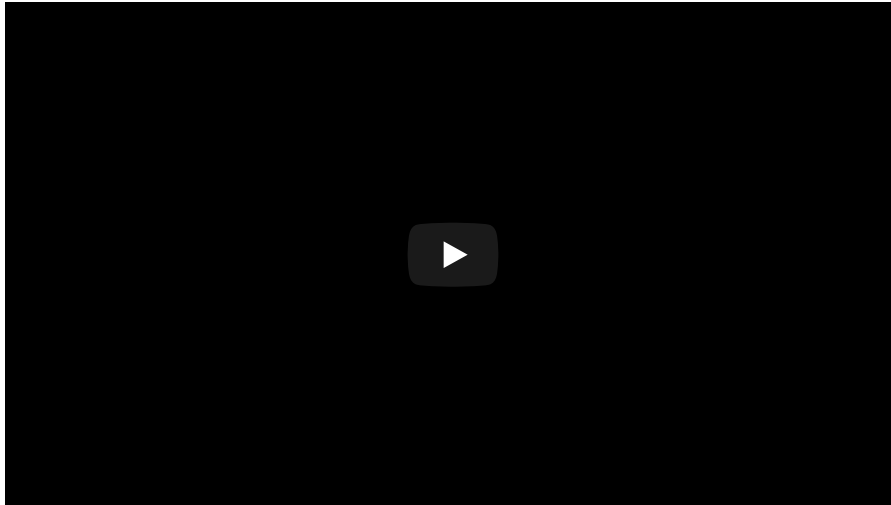
Text: Aravin Sandran

08.10.19 [f](#) [t](#) [G+](#)

Growing up, [Devendra Banhart](#) was the man I aspired to be: tirelessly creative and curious with the serenity of a Buddhist monk — not to mention, beautifully put together.

You probably first chanced upon him either by encountering his unique Sanskrit name on a tabloid headline or spotting his eccentric style in a paparazzi snapshot alongside his famous ex-girlfriend Natalie Portman back in 2008 when they dated.

The pair got together after Natalie for some strange reason was cast as a distressed princess in his wild Bollywood-themed MV for "Carmensita".



The truth is, the Venezuelan-American is so much more than his dating history. The bearded 40-year-old is a world-renowned psych-folk musician with nine albums under his belt, an accomplished visual artist (his artworks front his albums), and most recently, a consummate poet with the launch of his debut poetry book.

I was lucky enough to catch up with him when he was in town last week in promotion of his latest album *Ma*. Sitting across him on a long sofa in the intimacy of one of Shang-ri La Hotel's rooms, our conversation meandered and drifted across his daily spiritual practice, his memories growing up in Venezuela, and his unexpected yearning for a Prada tissue holder.

I would like to start off by asking you about your presence. Some have described it as tender and sensitive. Have you always been this way, or was it something you grew into?

It's difficult to explain, though. The truth is that I don't necessarily like people that much. It's a challenge and in that challenge, I discover compassion. I prefer to be totally alone. It would be pretty good if I could just hang out in a cave alone, but the reality is that it might be really uncomfortable. It's a very self-centred kind of compassion, but I really want to try to love everyone, so I don't have to hate everybody, which is more of my natural state.

I've heard that you practice Buddhism. Does your spiritual practice impact your demeanor and mental state?

I probably owe my life to Vajrayana Buddhism. I also practice a type of meditation taught by Prem Rawat. Any little bit equanimity comes from that practice. It's a daily practice.

I would like to talk about your travels next. You were born in Texas, and you grew up in Venezuela. Tell me about the sights, smells, and sounds you've experienced.

Venezuela is a very big part of my life. I was brought up there and my family is still there. I miss it now because of the tremendous suffering that's occurring at the moment. On a more beautiful note, Venezuela is similar to Singapore, where you have this lush jungle feeling. I could walk by a mango tree and I could just pick it. I remember the sounds of the jungle were like a very frightening orchestra that can feel both murderous or comforting like a muttering lullaby. My last travel experience was in Nepal. It was really wild.

You mentioned in a previous interview that you don't necessarily like the music you make, but you love making it. You've made nine albums so far, including the latest one, *Ma*. What didn't you like, but loved making?

How interesting! I loved the environment that I was in. I started the record in a temple in Kyoto. I made the record with Noah Georgeson. For us, Northern

California was the most accessible and obvious choice. We would open up all the windows and it was really pleasant. Writing songs is not fun. It's just mistakes after mistakes and failure after failure.

Talking about writing, you've just released your debut poetry book, *Weeping Gang Bliss Void Yab-Yum*. Where did the title come from? There's a whole range of emotions in it.

That's a nice way of reading it. There's a very deep meaning to Yab-Yum. In Buddhism, it is symbolised as a man and a woman to represent the union of wisdom and compassion. The rest of the title is some sort of spaciousness. That's the fun thing about poetry too. It should be easy to interpret or there should be many ways of interpreting it. I like really short poetry, but unfortunately, my titles tend to just get a little bit too long.

Did you write everything on the typewriter in your house ?

I did. I'm embarrassed to say.

You've got incredible style and your house is very beautiful too. Do you have any pieces of design that you love?

I love the Haas Brothers. I've got quite a few pieces by them, but I can't afford too much art. That's why vinyl is so exciting because sometimes a record's cover can be art.

Last question, what would a Devendra Banhart starter pack look like?

Just a lot of tissue, Kleenex, and wet wipes. That's it. I'm trying to get Prada to make tissue for me. I just want a nice beautiful case with just one product in it.

*Devendra Banhart's album Ma is available on Apple Music and all other digital music streaming platforms. His debut poetry book *Weeping Gang Bliss Void Yab-Yum* is available for purchase at [BooksActually](#).*

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