

Thundercat — Being There

Photography — Keith Oshiro
Styling — Ian McRae



No Sesso long-sleeve, trousers & hat, Thundercat's own trainers



ERL jumper, Greg Lauren jeans, Kenzo boots, Poche hat

Stephen Bruner AKA Thundercat's new record marks a transition in many ways; not just in terms of subject matter, but in terms of how we perceive him. The ebullient dress sense and the generosity of spirit remains, but there's an added layer to him, a sense of contrast which adds nuance to an already established artist, and it's fascinating to see.

Interview by Gemma Lacey

Talking about grief in 2020 is a layered thing. Collectively, we're all reeling from the loss of "normal life" but for anyone experiencing something deeper, this is a time to reset and reflect. The themes in Thundercat's new record, *It Is What It Is* couldn't be more prescient.

Part of the reason is that the record was painful to make; 2018 saw Bruner lose his best friend Mac Miller and the shockwaves of that have rippled through not only what he's created, but also his being. Our interview finds him fresh from a phase of self discovery, having become vegan, quit drinking and adopting a new health regime. Physically, he's the healthiest he's ever been and it shows: during a long day of shooting, he effortlessly whips between outfit changes and props without losing energy or enthusiasm.

It's when we finally sit down to talk that the shift between his exuberance is palpable; he's immediately very composed and thoughtful but doesn't shy away from the motivation for this record and how for him it was "very, very painful" and created during "some of the most turbulent moments in my whole 30 some odd years of living." In its own way though, the

album serves as the perfect accompaniment to this grief or as he puts it, "Narrates what was happening in real time for me". He says making albums typically feels like "you're going through a moment that you'll look back on from the other end." And when I ask what his reflection at the end of this one was, he says, "It kinda messed me up a bit". With this record, his whole life had changed. "I lost a hundred pounds. I stopped drinking alcohol. I became vegan. The woman that I was going to marry left me, my best friend died."

A huge amount of transition for anyone, this has clearly left its mark, both physically and artistically. When listening to the record, there's a haunting tenderness which underlies its overall groove, suggesting sadness and reflection along the way. That's not to say the music is melancholy, it's more inherently sensitive and mature in how it unfolds.

We discuss the huge changes to the landscape for an artist and the lack of opportunities to perform – something he feels keenly because "genuinely, the thing that always snaps me back into reality is touring". We talk about why this is, when many artists can find the

chaos of touring stressful. Given Bruner's deep heritage in that world, he says: "I've always been a playing, touring musician. So there's a part of it where it's a bit of solace for me. It's like the chance to put blinders on and consistently focus on sharpening the sword. That's what it's always felt like, working towards something, the chance to learn something new about the something that you know. So it becomes a bit cathartic to play on stage a lot."

A long-time collaborator, Bruner is a born team player and one who gets off on the team dynamic. "I like playing and like getting the chance to play with other individuals and create a bit of a synergy between each other growing together. Like you start getting in each other's minds on stage, nothing makes up for that."

There's more to his art as a conduit for emotion. A long-time collaborator with Flying Lotus, he joins a long dynasty of hyper-spiritual music makers touched by the legacy of Alice Coltrane. We talk about how this manifests in his work and he has a beautifully simple way of putting it: "Somewhere between connecting to the instrument, you are always trying



Worstok World jumper & trousers, Kenzo boots



This page: Givenchy jumper, Panconesi ear cuff, Gentle Monster glasses, Thundercat's own necklaces
Opposite page: Super Mario x Levi's denim set, Amiri turtleneck, Givenchy boots, Thundercat's own sunglasses



to be connected with God. And at the same time trying to connect to each other, there's a bit of it that your heart's really there. And you know, all these little things we always talk about, we only use 10% of our brains. This is the part where we're trying to use our whole heads to go somewhere else. Like where can we take this? Where are we going? Where can we go with this? I feel Mac Miller was like that. You know, Kamasi [Washington] is like that, you know, Robert Glasper is like that. There's a few people that are like that, you know? And you just want to see *it*, keep moving, and bring life."

This collective celebration is inherent in his work, and one which reflects why he's always been such a significant collaborator prior to releasing his own material. Bruner is someone who's generous enough to celebrate someone else's artistry but also brings the very best of his own to enhance their work. I ask him what he thinks it is that unites him and his collaborators. "I think there is something very spiritual to it, something about it being very connected to your soul, and wanting to connect, you know? And

I think that we're all searching for that in one form or another, some people try to act like they aren't, but the people that I've spent time working with are definitely people that have the same type of emotion or sentiment." We discuss if he seeks this out or if it's a by-product of focusing on his art. He believes it's more subtle than either. "We gravitate towards each other. We tend to find each other, it just happens like that. Growing up, like the part where I grew up with Kamasi Washington, at the time I didn't know it but the older I get and the more I look at these moments in life, I'm realising how blessed and fortunate we were to even be able to exist together."

I ask if he has any other talents he enjoys and he reveals he's also an illustrator. "I've been drawing just as long as I played bass and I'm always freezing my fans and my friends out whenever they see me draw like the human shape or something. And it really looks like things that I've been drawing for a long time, but it's just something that is a bit temperamental, more temperamental than the music. And I'm working on it." His main chal-

lenge with art is finding patience. "I have a couple of friends that spend their time doing it. And I look at them and I'm just like, golden, because you can sit there and be patient with yourself and all that stuff. For me, I get antsy, all my emotions start flying and I'll be halfway there and then I'll be like 'ah, I need to go outside.' It's so weird, it's a different temperament for me." We talk about why he doesn't see the patience he has with music in the same light and he says it all comes down to focus, "Interestingly enough, I think that it's also because I chose music as where that goes. So a lot of my energy, I tend to save it or exude it in the music."

In the end, focus is an integral theme of the times and his world. The music, when he's playing, is an outlet for those emotions and not a spotlight on them as with his art. I ask if there's any parting things he'd like to share and his answer is deceptively simple and tender. "I've been trying to have less to say, and be more observant. I don't really have anything else, just try to be there for somebody." Which on a grander scale is exactly what he's doing for us all with this record.



Poche visor cap, Gentle Monster sunglasses & trainers, Emporio Armani vest & trainers, Kenzo poncho



This page: Worstok World jumper & trousers, Kenzo boots
Opposite page: ERL jumper, Greg Lauren jeans, Kenzo boots, Poche hat

Grooming: Homa Safar
Set designer: David Browne
Photographer's assistants: Dallas Wing, Juliet Lambert
Stylist's assistant: Auden Alblooshi
PA: Nori Rasmussen
Covid Compliance Officer: Eric Hersey





This page: Vienna top by Khaite
Opposite page: Mariah dress by Khaite

a young age, designing clothes was all I cared about; but because it flowed out of me, it actually went unnoticed as a career path. I thought I'd be a fine artist potentially, or maybe a graphic designer – but never fashion design.

CB: I really like your clothes. As a man who works in this business, I start to recognise what all the chic women are actually wearing. It's really wearable in a way that I feel traces the lineage of you working for places like the Gap and J.Crew. I like that you can see the history of your path from there to the clothes you're making now. And I don't think that's conscious.

CH: No, it's not. I never wanted to start Khaite, to tell you the truth. I was at that point in my career where I went into these companies as a consultant to make their collections more commercial, more sellable. And the numbers would always go up once I went in there. But on the side, I could never find clothes I actually wanted. I would always say it's so strange how people say fashion is so competitive – because if it's so competitive, then why does it take me so much goddamn time to find what I want to buy? And also, why do I have to go to 10 different stores to buy the things that I want to buy?

CB: Yeah, of course.

CH: At the same time, Net-a-Porter was a fascinating thing for me. I was an early Net-a-Porter shopper, like in 2003. I remember when it came out, everyone thought there was no way that luxury could sell online. But I was always thinking about how

no one was merging the European luxury houses, and how their .coms looked like garbage and were hard to use. Wouldn't it be the dream to merge retail with the actual brand? The margins would be so much higher. And Net-a-Porter was that one-stop-shop that wound up making two billion in revenue in a year without any store locations. It was my friend Charlie (who still is my partner and board member to this day) who asked, 'why don't you just do this?' And I was like, 'because I would never start a brand again, that's insane.' And he was just like, 'I don't know, I really think you could do this.' This conversation was over dinner at Blue Ribbon Sushi six years ago when I was at the lowest point in my life – I didn't know where my career was going, I had just broken up with my ex and I moved into a windowless bedroom in Bushwick.

CB: You don't really strike me as a Bushwick type, so this feels extra dark to me.

CH: I mean, I've had many lifetimes in New York. But at that point I was just a shell of a person. I went home that night thinking, 'if I do this, then I'm going to really have to do it. I'm going to have to quit all my consultancies, and everything I do has to go into this.' Charlie and I joke around about that night all the time now. I'm still dumbfounded over how big it's gotten so fast. I did really put all my energy into it, and I still put all my energy into it, and I'm so happy I made that choice. Like it was an actual choice. At 10pm on that Tuesday night I was like, 'okay, I'm going to do this.'

CB: After you started the brand, was there a piece of clothing that really took off, making you feel like you were on the right path?

CH: I remember getting a lot of reaction to the first poster campaign we did. And then there was a collaboration with Manolo Blahnik that did very well. But it was the denim that took off really fast, followed by the cashmere. And the Katie Holmes thing was just like another level. I kind of hate to talk about that, to tell you the truth, but the fact that it's even still circulating and talked about... British Vogue, for instance, just did an article last week on how so many designers are doing knit twin sets based on the Katie Holmes look. That image was a turning point for sure.

CB: I mean, absolutely. And that's something that I think that every designer, you know, secretly hopes for in some way. The cashmere twin set – basically wearing a bra with a sweater, for lack of a better phrasing – is equal parts sexy and understated. And to me that's what defines the clothes you're making. I think it was the right piece to get that reaction because there was nothing else like it, and it represents the brand.

CH: Before it took off, my merchandising team was trying to get me to discontinue the cashmere bra because it wasn't selling. And I would always say, 'no, I actually really believe in that thing, we're keeping it.' I used to really shy away from the word sexy, like I was too good for it. There's an idea that high fashion





Ascher top, Gabbie jeans, Georgia heels all by Khaite

Model: Dilone at Viva Model Management
Makeup: Rei Tajima at Bridge Artists
Hair: Tsuki at Streeters
Casting: Claire Rhodes at Casting By Us

puts out there that, in order to be a strong, smart woman, you have to dress like a man. Everything has to be baggy and oversized and heavy, like *that* is strength. And as a female designer, I felt almost brainwashed into thinking that sexy was unsophisticated, leaving it to the more extravagant male designers. But you know what? Fuck that. I want to dress really, really provocatively. So I have been embracing what I wanted as completely plain, but overtly sexy.

CB: And also there's a comfort, I imagine, that women must feel when buying clothes designed by other women. There's a deeper understanding of what it means to wear the clothes from your perspective versus that of a man.

CH: I have formulas that stem from my lifelong obsession around finding the perfect pair of pants. Things that a man might not realise, like if you curve an inseam, it makes for a very flattering cut, or how fabrics feel on our bodies. I think my customers are just really in this exploration with me. I'll always be chasing the horizon, I'll never be satisfied. I'll never have it because fashion is ever-evolving.

CB: That's probably a good thing in the long run, to keep you motivated and searching for the next thing. I also want to touch on the accessories. I think accessories for a lot of designers feel like an afterthought; and while they may not seem like something you start with, you keep them top of mind.

CH: No matter what size you are, you're a shoe customer. And you physically stand in them all day, so if it's a great luxury shoe, you really feel it. Manolo Blahnik in particular creates such an elegant shoe, you can just feel the quality when you're standing on it, and his stroke of genius is that you feel more like a lady when you wear it. But I didn't necessarily want to feel like a lady. I want everybody to feel very strong. That is what we say when we talk about Khaite, that it's very strong, maybe a little edgy. We want to go

for it. You can take a lot of subtle risks with shoes that are really fun. I love designing shoes.

CB: Your Venice shoe is so crazy to me, I've never seen a silhouette like that. I really like it. I also know you did a collaboration with Adidas. I have always been super anti-Adidas – I'm a Nike die-hard – but I think Adidas work so well on women. Having grown up in London, do you have an affinity for that brand?

CH: For sure. Adidas and Kappa. That was the jam, all the rude boys and rude girls had their full Adidas and Kappa suits. Adidas is very enticing to me because they're very particular with who they work with. Adidas just doesn't come out with as many styles as Nike does, so each shoe is much more defining of an era. Gazelles really do look great on women.

CB: Kate Moss and a Gazelle is the most iconic image from that time period. I also love Oasis and the Stone Roses and Blur, and all those guys were die-hard.

CH: I went to the American School in London, off Abbey Road, so we would see those guys all the time because they all lived around Abbey Road Studios. And we would see Keith from Prodigy all the time. I remember when *Smack My Bitch Up* came out and how scary that music video was. And like, where are the Marilyn Mansons' of the world today? I remember seeing those first images of Marilyn Manson, literally feeling scared shitless. And I remember watching him perform *Beautiful People* at the MTV VMA's and my mother was like, 'you cannot watch that.' We were not a sheltered family, but my mum was horrified. Where are they today? Because that's important, you know.

CB: I think that everything is just more niche. You know what I mean?

CH: But that's the thing, he was a huge pop star. I don't feel like that could happen in pop now. And I think that's a real shame. The 90s

were the most prolific for pop music and for pushing forward. And I'm kind of hoping that it comes back as a result of this, actually. In the 90s it was very cool to be sad, and that cultural embrace of darkness might happen again. It was very accepting of our society to make Marilyn Manson a pop star. So I'm hoping for a little acceptance now.

CB: We now all live in these taste bubbles, in our own worlds. It's very difficult for America at this point, being splintered in so many ways, to come together and agree on something as good, bad, edgy, whatever. I think that's partly due to the internet and partly just due to where we are as a society. But I do think there are going to be some pretty big shifts. Anyway, what have you been wearing during quarantine? Are you still getting dressed or are you taking it easy?

CH: I've been in the office since June, and that renewed sense of routine was incredible for my survival and my sanity. I'm pretty much back to what I would normally wear, but in general it's always very casual. I'm a jeans and sweater person. Today I'm wearing the new gold cowboy boots, my black tile jeans. I'm actually wearing a Celine men's flannel and the Khaite Cordelia leather jacket.

CB: Selfishly I have to ask, is there a men's line on the horizon?

CH: I would love to do men's, but what I was saying earlier about the body freaks me out. I don't know what men are looking for, I don't know what their hang ups about their bodies are.

CB: We're very particular in our own way. But you're succeeding with what you're doing. I think it's very cool and very of the moment. And it's always nice to hear how somebody gets there when, you know, what they're doing is good.

CH: Well, there were a lot of failures up until this point. I fully believe that people need to fail a lot in order to succeed.