

INTO THE VOIDZ

At the start of our shoot The Voidz enter in a seemingly endless procession, each member more eclectic and stylish than the last. Until at last frontman Julian Casablancas arrives in an awesome 80s sports car, bringing 100% Knight Rider vibes and wrap around mirrored shades.

It's fitting that their sound builds in a similar way, the product of a group of supremely skilled musicians finding that magical junction of collaboration that yields great things all helmed by Julian as a conductor curator. Or, as band member Jake Bercovici puts it: "It's like a castle with multiple points of entry. There's a hundred different ways for it to happen. It can start really with anything you might imagine with a lyric, with a riff, with a jam, with a cord, with a tone, with someone, something prepared. But really it's the sort of 12 hands sculpting. And I think that at least the way I look at it is that Julian tends to be the sort of curator of, and also sort of inspirer of what we do together in a room."

Julian chimes in to say it's like "that moment in ghost with Patrick Swayze when they're sculpting the thing, but all together" displaying a wry humor.

Given that most of the band started their musical journey in a pre-internet era we discuss the impact of that and how it affects young artists but Julian neither sees things as old vs new, "I think both that it's the nature of things to degrade and resample themselves into new entities that I think previous generations inherently see as unoriginal or reduced. I think it's just the nature of the mind to perceive things that way as time goes by. So I think that both things can be true and both things can be false at the same time. It's really just the nature of people to think that way. I think that it's sort of just more all-encompassing than it is maybe for us to perceive at a given point in time."

For Jake his take is a little different. "I would say that there's probably been for a long time a kind of journey towards less expert craftsmanship in a narrow field where there's a few people that make statues or marble then now I think with the internet, so many people have so much more information. So there's probably way more people percentage-wise who can participate in the arts and stuff, I feel like it's not just, obviously having a mentor at some point, which I think is a big important thing, but really anyone can decide they want to do X and just kind of jump in with the internet. So I think it's more accessible."

This sparks some debate from Julian. "It's interesting though because is that part of social evolution or civilizational evolution so the sort of extremes get brought together? There's less complete enslaved suffering and less Michelangelo and da Vinci's and we're getting squeezed into this middle of opportunity where it's inherent that everything has to sort of average out or something like that."

One thing Julian has been vocal on previously is social justice and also changes in society at large. I ask if he thinks a universal basic income would level the playing field and allow for more craft purely by freeing up time.

I dunno about that. I think in the modern era, there's kind of a one size fits all education, and that approach doesn't really make sense usually. So I think with education, I always find that strange. I think if people could follow a mixture of what actually interests them or what they're good at from a young age and discover that I think whether it would be gardening or science or whatever, I think people would, they could be more in tune with that. I don't think necessarily everyone would just do art. I mean maybe some people that don't do art would do art if they weren't being repressed, but there might also be people that just decide they want to be famous or rock stars or whatever.







WE ALL TAKE A LOT OF PRIDE AND JOY COMING UP WITH STUFF

For him though it doesn't end with what opportunities it would create but also the bigger debate it raises. "I think the quality of opportunity and guarantee of minimal housing and food and water, I think those things are good. I think universal basic income is one of those kind of modern divisive things that some people I know like Chomsky on the left and or maybe more Chris Hedges, but some people view that as a kind of ploy from the Elon Musk type industrial leaders to just make sure that everyone has money to spend on their Amazon subscriptions. But I think guaranteeing that there isn't this kind of bottom of insane suffering is good."

I raise the idea that great art and suffering are often entwined, especially most recently as we start to see everyone's post-pandemic creations but their take is more nuanced.

In terms of the broader art thing, you can look at it as a pressure creates diamonds thing, but I think it's not just suffering alone because that can come out in different ways. It has to be in order to create the sound you're hearing, there is this kind of mastery and the practice. And so if you've mastered that and there is suffering, sometimes the suffering can be at different times though I feel like the things that you create also, you know, can be in a happy place and access past sad things or be in a sad place and write a happy thing. And things that you heard three years ago or 10 years ago might come out in something you're writing. So I think that is hard too, everyone's different. Some people might be like, I'm in a good mood and I write a happy song. I don't know. For me it's definitely a mysterious well that you never know what is going to be in the bucket when you pull it up. Having said that, in terms of themes for this record, I think there's a couple of themes. I don't know in terms of the pandemic, I think we tried to, I think we started a lot of it before and then things were on hold and then kind of finished it recently. So I don't think there was a lot of pandemic energy in there personally.

We return to the discussion about how they come together as such a large group and make creative choices. As Jake puts it, "the first image that came to my mind was the gumbo. I guess it's just like this six ingredient casserole that is only what it is with those ingredients. I think I said it when we're six different breakfast cereals in one bowl and I'm mixing cereals and we taste good. I think that's just how it's sorta, it's, it's almost like, yeah, it's like six-part harmony. It's just trying to find the way it moves and works and feels alive through this sort of six handled bladed man's sword. Yeah, the first thing I was saying is that Jules is just a really good reverse cinematographer or curator. He just is able to see things where we don't even know what we're doing and harness the different prisms and just get 'em through some sort of aperture. And I think that's it. We all take a lot of pride and joy and coming up with stuff and Jules just has this sort of the ear for what we're all doing and is the cameraman at the same time."

That doesn't mean there isn't room for them all to shine though. "I think everyone is bringing their scene stealing moments and there's so much room for everyone to be upfront and the tip of the creative blade. But again, I think, we just naturally know that the last hands it's going to be in are Julian's hands and it's a really cool process. We sort of trust the sort of six-headed prismatic feel of it, that that's sort of where it ends and it just progresses that way." Julian echoes this sentiment.

I think there's a strong, very strong thread or current that just kind of runs through everyone where, just in terms of the things that we actually make, the way it works together is pretty cool. It really feels like a Voltron thing



HOW CAN YOU DESIGN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT HUMAN BEING?

where its different skills come together just in terms of the things we are, the taste is, it's not strange for strange sake. I feel like we really find these kinds of hidden gems and powerful unseen things. I think we really relate and we show each other things and it comes out. I think in terms of humor, humanistically and stylistically, we all have different hues, but when we're together it's always just kind of worked. I don't even understand how, but as soon as we got together just musically from day one, every recording, just talking, hanging, doing music, whatever it is, it just flowed. Even if it was someone sitting out or someone just doing, I think we are also trying to maybe impress each other sometimes and that's also by not overplaying, I think we're not just these kinds of cats and everyone's like, you know what I mean, shredding and showing off. I think we all know how to help a song grow, everyone has these different skills, but I could go through each person and it's a really interesting aspect they bring. It's a construction crew that works psychically or something.

I ask how intentional the creation of the group was, did their paths cross naturally or was Julian searching out certain skills or sounds. "It was both. I mean, it was a similar weird process as the kind of long, similar time length and journey of finding The Strokes. I was a lot more experienced I guess and then we'd all been through similar situations, weirdly been in bands and had all the band cliché things. When I was starting it, I was looking for this kind of musical experience that was a little more kind of—I can't really think of a single word, it's going to cheapen it. If I say 'challenging' or 'powerful' or I was just on this kind of quest of creating really next level interesting, powerful music that maybe in its time never made it and only saw the light of day 50 years later, but figured out how to make that popular in its own time. I think that's been the quest from the beginning for me in different ways."

In part playing with The Voidz was also a huge personal journey and discovery for him. "Musically I was trying to just really take that to the next level. After I did the solo record, I realized that I liked collaborating with other people and doing it live in a room. I met Alex and Jeff, they were the first people. I stopped writing drum beats after I met Alex and Jeff just had such a sense of helping harmony and kind of aiding a melody because he is a composer. And then little by little, kind of putting all the pieces together, there were different elements. I don't want to bore you with all the musical intricacies, but it took a while to get it right and it's hard to figure that out of people who respect each other and get along and don't step on each other's toes. In many ways it, it's a really tricky, hard thing and it's still not the easiest thing in the world, but I think ultimately very worth it in the end."

It's clear there's a real affinity amongst the group overall. "I think it's a family trying to be proud of each other, trying to have the other people be proud of what you're doing." Bercovici supports this. "I feel like what we all do is if I'm at home coming up with a chord progression or if I'm at rehearsal and we're just jamming and I'm playing bass or something, the thought that goes through my head isn't, 'I'm going to come up with a hit song right now.' The thought that goes through my head is 'I want to bug out my homies right now with some crazy fucked up shit.' I think that we all have that ear for each other and that spirit for who's going to surprise who and when kind of spirit. I think for me, that's what's impressive about everyone is that every time we get together, whether it's just a passing moment that's lighthearted or really emotional or just technically interesting or whatever, there's always doing something which is, we have so many songs in the tank because we just are constantly coming up with stuff."



IT JUST SEEMS PRETTY ARCHAIC AND RELATIVELY NEW.

That sounds frenetic but they assure me that "once things reach the editing room, that's when things slow down. But before things get there, to keep going with the metaphor, just like we just shoot so much film. We have so much recorded and so many ideas labeled, but as soon as, 'okay, let's turn it into something people can watch,' that's when things slow down. I think that we're constantly impressing each other, bugging each other out, or blowing each other's minds with just that spirit of things like kids almost trying to just make each other laugh, but the musical version or something like that."

The free flowing approach is really found in playing together. "It's more like jamming, this psychic construction. It's like we kind of write songs. There's like the verse and the chorus and the solo it's making up a song on the spot, kind of the way The Roots did on Jimmy Fallon. I think we're doing that a lot and we do it sometimes live. I think there's moments in songs we have fun with, but I think in general, messing with the way a song is, we don't really do that so much because that personally can get weird. If you want to see a song and they do a weird different version. I'm 98% of the time not a fan of that, but I don't think anyone is really, but other than the band who's sick of playing it the old way. So I think there's an element of playing live where you stick to the song, unless you're a full on jazz musician, which we pretend to be, but we're not. We love to jam and we do it live but we don't do crazy new salsa versions of the old songs because that's annoying."

Given their futuristic sensibilities it seems foolish not to discuss AI and the impact of that on music and their feelings on that, Jake's take is practical.

My first feeling is that I feel like I'm talking about the internet in 1991. I'm like, well, it's going to end the world and all that. I feel like there's a part of me that just feels like I just became someone from the past. So honestly, that's my first thought that comes up because it just seems like they said everything, cars, were going to kill everybody and then the internet was going to ruin the world, which it is ruining the world. So that is my first thought. But it's hard to know honestly. I think so, some of it's entertaining, it's interesting and it's also terrifying.

For Julian it raises a lot of different issues. "The art is cool, I think it comes up with a lot of interesting design ideas, maybe not finished, but inspiring. I think to see things differently or think of things differently. So from that point of view, I think they did a good job. I think from the text point of view and all that, I feel really annoyed at the responsibility of some of the people programming it. My main thing about AI is it's not really AI, it's not sentient, really just it's advanced programming. It's a human mimicking programming. I feel like for me, how can you design artificial intelligence if you don't understand the present human being? You know what I mean? So there's skipped steps and the people who are doing it, it's like who are these random, computer people that are going to decide all these important things?"

Both feel that artistically it's not yet a challenge. "In terms of actually making something, I don't think it's really there yet or going to really, but I think it'll push the envelope probably in a good way."

I ask if there's anything they are excited about in the near future and get a typically nonplussed response from Julian "Excitement is such a weird thing. I just think I don't really get excited in a traditional way anymore. If I'm really excited about something, I just want it to go. So with the record, I'm trying to be prepared and I am excited for it to hopefully go well and people to like it, but there's just so many variables that I just try to not get ahead of myself."

Given that he was part of such an iconic time in music I ask how it feels to have that reflected back at him in the recent books and documentary, *Meet Me in the Bathroom*. "It's pretty wild to me. I don't really pay too much attention. I saw it on tv and I watched five minutes about it and it kind of freaked me out. I was like, 'whoa, that's so weird.' I see what they're trying to do and I don't know. I'm grateful in a way, and also in another way, I feel like it's just not comparable to, *Please Kill Me* or that kind of era that probably needed that movie more. I mean, I definitely needs it more. So, I don't know. I genuinely try not to think about it because it's strange."

Given a platform they'd prefer to discuss "psychedelics, desert landscaping and 16th century history." But as Jake says, "there's no reason for any of that to come up in the context of album promotion." And Julian? Well outside of the record he's currently obsessing over electricity. "It just seems like an untapped thing that we haven't really figured out how to harness. It just seems pretty archaic and relatively new." A pretty fitting end to an interview for a man with the energy to launch one moment in music and who with The Voidz seems pretty set to create one in the next era too.

