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Singer Ben Lee searching for the universal truth

Music transforms into messages of hope

By KEITH VALCOURT

Aussie singer/songwriter Ben Lee has grown up in music. From his early days in the punk band Noise Addict, Mr. Lee has survived high-profile Hollywood relationships and shifting music tastes to become a man on a mission: spreading hope through music.

Mr. Lee waxes philosophical on universal truths, the influence of Jonathan Richman and how his latest pop album was almost called "Music to Die To."

Question: What kind of music did you grow up on?

Answer: A combination of the radio in the '80s — Pet Shop Boys and Motley Crue and Michael Jackson. My parents listened to what you would probably call family-friendly folk music. I suppose it was more formative than I might have imagined. They listened to John Denver, Peter Paul and Mary, stuff that very much influenced the aesthetic of what I do now.



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Ben Lee says the folk music of his formative years influences the work he creates today.

It crystallized the idea in me that there could be music that is appropriate for a whole family without it being kids' music, that there could be melody and emotion and hope existing in all levels of music and that we should be able to gather together like a traditional guitar going around a campfire.

Q: You started in the punk band Noise Addict but transitioned to folk. Who inspired you?

A: When Noise Addict started, I discovered Jonathan Richman. He became a sort of "missing link" thing for me. The aesthetic was right. It had this low-fi punk thing. But it was also family music and kids' music. It was innocent. It wasn't about anger. There was no swearing. I would play, and my parents would be psyched too.

His music really spoke to me. Ever since I discovered him, I knew where I wanted to go musically, for better or worse.

Q: Does your music have a theme or a message?

A: At a gig the other night, I had a woman say to me, "I love the message of your music." And I thought, "Huh? What is that?" Because you

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are interested in what people say. She said, "The message is, 'There is hope.'" I thought, "Yes!"

I don't know if I'm going to take that on as my logo and put that on a T-shirt, but I like the idea that hope might be a thread in the music I do. There are so many singers singing "there is no hope." I like the idea that there is a basic human need for hope.

Q: Has there ever been a moment in your career where you stopped making music?

A: No. There have been many ebbs and flows, moments where I had a

less-mature outlook. But I know now failure is just what happens on the way to the next success.

Q: What do you think of the current state of the music business with TV singing shows and YouTube stars?

A: I don't have time or energy to philosophize about the music business. I believe in adapting, but not adapting blindly. I have a healthy skepticism for every new business model that appears. Yet you've got to jump in to stay afloat. It's a business, and we're artists who feel we have something to share. You have to find a way to do that — to make it work within whatever system comes into play.

Q: What was the recording process behind your new record?

A: I had self-produced my last two records. But for this one I worked with Brad Wood, who I have made records with in the past. [We] recorded in [the San Fernando] Valley.

Recently, I have been really involved in all this death work. I wanted to understand consciousness and how it transitions. I thought I was going to make an abstract niche record about that called "Music to Die To." But as I started writing, some pop songs came out. I feel this album finds the most balance between my abstract impulses and commercial sensibility.

Q: With almost a dozen albums

in your catalog, how do you decide what songs to do when you play live?

A: I feel like when I'm playing live, I want to remind myself and remind the audience of something. I choose the songs that will aid in that process. [For] this tour, my concern is courage. So I want all the songs to be centered around that.

Q: What advice would Ben Lee in 2015 give to the young Ben Lee at age 14?

A: Close your eyes more. Don't watch what everyone is doing. Truly obey the impulses in your psyche. The thing you feel deep inside you is real. You're not wrong. Close your eyes and listen to that internal voice.