

Exclusive Interview with Will Toledo

On June 2nd 2014, Will Toledo took the time to answer a few questions specifically for publication in my music publication about his project Car Seat Headrest, specifically his 2011 album Twin Fantasy.



DrJack: Unfortunately, there is little information about you personally an artist available to your fans on the internet. Could you give a quick bio of you as a person and an artist for the readers of The Christmas Album IV, who will more than likely only know you by the name “Car Seat Headrest”?

Will Toledo: *Sure, though the reason there's not much info on me is that there's not much to say! My name is Will Barnes, AKA Will Toledo (my mother's maiden name). I've lived in Northern Virginia my whole life, and recently graduated from William & Mary. As far as Car Seat Headrest goes, I started the project my senior year of high school as an outlet for recording more experimental tracks, and eventually developed into my main project over the next 4 years.*

DrJack: Congratulations on graduating. What was your major? Plans after graduation?

Will Toledo: *I majored in English with a minor in Religious Studies (very useful). I'm currently living with my parents, but I'm planning on moving to Seattle this summer to try and develop CSH into a full band.*

DrJack: Are you very religious yourself? Why Seattle?

Will Toledo: *I'm not religious in the normal sense, but I'm very interested in how people conceive of spirituality and incorporate it into their lives. Studying religion is also a conduit into history, as it's influenced the development of virtually all cultures. Seattle I'm choosing because I know people there, it's supposed to be a thriving music scene, and it seems friendlier than New York.*

DrJack: The Pacific northwest has certainly been a thriving area for all types of music, which also brings me to my next question: I have described your music a combination of Lo-Fi and Post Punk Revival. Do you agree with that? How would you categorize yourself?

Will Toledo: *I wouldn't disagree with it. I don't usually bother trying to label my own music with a genre; I leave that up to the people who listen to it. To me, I hear in my own music the things that influenced it, both experiences and other music. I'm definitely lo-fi, but I wasn't aware post-punk needed a revival!*

DrJack: Well, that's sort of the umbrella term I have seen used to describe artists like The Strokes or Interpol, which also leads me to my next question: One of the things I love about Twin Fantasy is that I feel like it wears its influences on its sleeve. While I don't know if these are accurate, I hear a lot of "The Glow Pt 2" by The Microphones and The Strokes in the album. Is there any truth to that? What albums/artists would you say were the key influences?

Will Toledo: *I actually don't listen to The Strokes much; I definitely respect their music, and have been compared with them a lot, but I wouldn't list them as a major influence. The Glow Pt 2 is definitely an amazing album, but again, I think the similarities are more coincidental than influential. Structurally, I think Pink Floyd was probably the biggest influence; they were my favorite band when I was younger, and I learned a lot about songcraft from listening to them. Other than that, it's kind of a bunch of random shit I was listening to at the time it was being written - Destroyer, John Lennon, even Bon Iver...stuff you wouldn't immediately expect, but which ended up giving that album its distinct flavor.*

DrJack: Could you speak to your recording process and how you were able to achieve the very unique lo-fi atmospheric sound?

Will Toledo: *Really, it's hard to say how it ended up sounding the way it did; it was mostly a matter of the tools I was using, namely Garageband and a few run-down instruments. At the time I was originally recording it, I thought that these would just be the demos, and I would find a studio to record it in afterwards. But I ended up just reworking the original tracks.*

DrJack: At times, it's really hard to distinguish what you are saying on the album, which I think gives it a lot of character and part of what makes it a 10/10. But it took reading the printed lyrics to really understand the scope of their significance. Do you ever fear that your message is lost in the reverb?

Will Toledo: *Yeah, it was the first album where it was really a concern - for the earlier CSH albums I'd just been singing nonsense for the most part. I didn't want Twin Fantasy to be indistinct in that way, and I did make a bit more effort to make the vocals heard.*

But still, I was mainly concerned with the shape of the songs, and that means that comprehension sometimes takes a back seat. I also think that sometimes lyrics have more meaning if you have to make a bit of an effort to interpret them; I grew up listening to REM, and Michael Stipe always said that what listeners heard from the lyrics was more important than what he wrote. I always include a lyrics sheet for the ones I want to be understood, but I also leave a bit of room for people to interpret it their own ways.

DrJack: Your lyrical style is very unique, and it's obvious that there is a lot of depth to themes of the album. As much as you are comfortable saying, what is Twin Fantasy about?

Will Toledo: *It's mainly about a relationship I was very invested in at the time, a lot of which was built on hopes and expectations, which ended up not being fulfilled. That gave it its shape, but it's also about where I was in life in general, the experiences I was going through...the teen movie of the month, basically.*

DrJack: Do you ever have hesitations about releasing lyrics and music that is so personal in nature?

Will Toledo: *Not really; I'm used to working out songs in private, without performing them, so it doesn't really feel like I'm talking to anyone besides myself when I record the stuff. By the time they come out on the album I'm a little more detached from the songs, since I'm familiar with them at that point. I recently played a personal song I'd just written to a couple friends, and it was surprisingly difficult. I do get embarrassed sometimes by older things I've released, but it doesn't really matter much, it's already out there.*

DrJack: Why the name "Car Seat Headrest"?

Will Toledo: *When I first started the project, I was looking for a name that wouldn't reveal much about the music or the creator, a sort of "blank" name. I was under the impression that I was making mysterious music. And I was recording vocals in the car, because I was embarrassed to sing with my parents in the house. So I came upon the idea of 'car seat headrest', and it stuck.*

I remember when I transferred to William & Mary, I joined student radio after sending in my music, and some guy called me "car seat headrest"... That was interesting

DrJack: Just by reading your description on Last.fm, it is obvious you have a tremendous sense of humor. How do you balance adding that humor (if any) to your music and still maintain the focus of the work?

Will Toledo: *Well, my music usually stems from problems I have, so there's rarely an issue of humor displacing content as the main gist of the work. I usually try to use humor as a method of maintaining perspective, of keeping the lyrics from getting too depressing or dramatic. If an album focuses on emotions but you can't get a laugh out of it, it's sort of missed the mark.*

DrJack: What is your biggest regret as an artist?

Will Toledo: *Interesting question! I guess that I haven't had enough confidence in my abilities to make it on my own.*

DrJack: What do you mean by that?

Will Toledo: *Like, going into Twin Fantasy with the idea that it would be redone in a studio -*

I should have had more faith that I could make it by myself

I've always been sort of holding back, waiting for a record deal or studio time or something

I'm only just starting to realize that I've got the power to accomplish what I want on my own

DrJack: Was it challenging to record all the parts separately and combine them after?

Will Toledo: *Not really, I've been doing it that way for a long time- even before CSH, I was recording songs by layering ever since I had the computer to do it.*

DrJack: Could you speak about your plans in Seattle? Are you going to try to get signed by a record label, make a new album, go on tour? Do you think the potential of having more resources at your disposal will affect your style?

Will Toledo: *I might do all those things, but what I'll consider most important is getting a group of people, not even necessarily bandmates, that I can trust to help out and support my music. I'm always trying to improve my production style, but my methods of writing will likely stay the same, so that basis will remain.*

DrJack: Although I am biased as a big (albeit relatively new) fan, I can't understand how your music isn't being distributed around the world, reviewed by major publications, etc. You have done a great job making a name for yourself but I feel like your music deserves so much more recognition than it is getting!! I think it is much better than many of the heralded releases in "indie" since 2010. Can you speak to this?

Will Toledo: *I think it's mixture of chance and my own style; usually an artist draws some initial attention with touring and live shows, uses it to get signed, uses the label to get national attention, and so on. That was never my method, so my chances of getting a foot in the door with a label was much smaller. There are some artists who self-release and end up getting big, but in reality this is pretty rare, and mostly a random occurrence. I used to hope it would happen, but in retrospect I'm glad that my growth in popularity has been more slow and steady than explosive. I'm lucky enough that I haven't been financially in need so far, and have been able to make music in my free time without needing to ask for much in return. Doing this virtually unnoticed for so long has given me a much better perspective on things than I would have if Twin Fantasy had somehow taken off and I'd gotten signed onto some label. Now I feel that the support I've gained over the years for CSH is stable enough that I can make my own choices, and not be pressured into compromising my music to capitalize on a moment of fame.*

DrJack: Album of the Year for 2013, and 2014 so far?

Will Toledo: *Looking up 2013 albums... haha...*

Ok, 2013 would be Deerhunter's Monomania, and 2014 would be Angel Olsen's Burn Fire For No Witness

DrJack: What did you think of Lil B's "Hoop Life" Mixtape?

Will Toledo: *Yeah, unfortunately I haven't checked out Hoop Life. I think Lil B is following me on Twitter... He's a chill guy! I like how weird his tweets are.*

DrJack: Not that I have something against dogs, but what's with the dog motif?

Will Toledo: *Hahaha. I think I'll leave that one a mystery.*