

# Soul Singer Bel-Ami Has A Solo Reckoning: The MUSE (ic) Interview



Bel-Ami's journey to the release of his self-titled solo album comes after a lifetime love of music. The Houston native started singing as a child surrounded by a supportive family and the city's fertile creative atmosphere of artists. In 2013, he released his first EP, *Know U*, which he admits was bold and naive at the time because he was new to recording. A relocation to Brooklyn, New York put him in a new environment of creators. Those connections lead to him becoming the lead singer of the R&B band the Herbivores. The last time Bel-Ami spoke with Kick Mag it was in support of their summer EP. Today he sees his own solo project come to fruition after a two-year incubation period. [MUSE \(ic\)](#) finds Bel-Ami's honeyed vocals in good company with some of New York City's best players including Lauryn Hill, Stevie Wonder and Adele alumni. In this interview, he shares the origins of *MUSE (ic)* and the importance of letting art breathe for its own sake.Â

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**The title is a play on the words muse and music?**

I think without a muse there is no music so the title being music being spelled in that particular way I believe that if

you shine your light and other people can do the same and you can use each other as muses. Like me and my brothers, I gave them the creative space to create their own full expression via their instrument and use that to inform the rest of my writing. The skeleton of my writing to inform what they play. I feel like if we could extrapolate that throughout the whole world now we would be in a better place.

### **Who or what are your muses?**

Anything I gain inspiration from it can be in people, a moment I experience things that I see more tangibly like people. I've had relationships that have given me plenty to write about whether they be romantic or just platonic or my brothers who I just kick it with I use to teach as well so kids. All of these things I use as muses to inform my creativity. Of course, there are artists who because they were operating in their full purpose being their best selves and sharing the best part of themselves.

### **Anyone in particular?**

D'Angelo and Bilal are two major influences at least where I find myself finding a home in the music that I create. Going even further if I had to think of a Mount Rushmore it would be Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and Donny Hathaway for anything R&B. From there I've been influenced by '90s R&B the groups I always said I was going to be in group growing up. I never even envisioned myself as going solo there's been so many people who have influenced me but definitely, those who have influenced me the most like those early 2000s neo-soul artists the Maxwells, the Bilals the D'Angelos.

### **So going back how did you start singing?**

I've always sung. My grandmother use to have a camcorder and I think the earliest video I've seen of myself was in her apartment in Philly I was probably like five-years-old. I was a huge Michael Jackson fan I mean who wasn't. I would try to

do all his dance moves but I wasn't trying to be a singer then it just felt good. Music was something that was always with me I didn't write my first song until I was in eighth grade. And I didn't perform publicly until that same year and once I saw the response it was kind of like that's all I needed. From then on music has been a major part of my life but I didn't get into recording until much later when I got to college. But I've always had friends and groups because groups were always the thing Dru Hill, Boyz II Men, Jodeci, Jagged Edge that just made you want to get your boys together and just write a love song.

**Houston is another great music city, is there anything about it specifically that inspires what you do?**

Yes, Houston has like heavy roots in music particularly. All of my experience growing up centers around Houston whether it be like the diverse cultures that I grew up around which opens me up to be influenced by different styles of music. Houston also has a really large arts culture as well especially visual arts. I was raised around a bunch of artists just the idea of art and expression itself I directly relate that to my experiences in Houston. I think that's why I approach this work the way that I do.

**How did you choose to sing R&B?**

I think it was just a product of where I was culturally what was popular as I was growing up those are things that stuck to me. If you look at R&B everything is about love. I think R&B most directly of any style is about that. I love love and I've had relationships that have really shaped and molded me into the person that I am today. And writing about those experiences is a beautiful thing it reminds you of where you were and how you got to be where you are and that's what I love about R&B music. There's so many different ways to write about it. You think about how all the music has changed and we go back to the '60s and it's completely different

now. But it's all about the same thing it's about love.

**You released your first EP *Know U* in 2013 so what's changed artistically for you since then?**

Everything has changed when I did *Know U* I was very green I didn't know what was going on I was discovering myself as a writer. I'm still very new to it although I had been writing songs I hadn't been recording like I said being a solo artist wasn't something that I envisioned for myself. But there was so much I had to get out and the way *Know U* came about I and really good friends of mine Justin Lewis and Al Jerray they went to my church and I was recording some stuff for a New Year's eve thing.

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They called me up were like "Yo man we're at the house let's record some stuff" and they proceeded to give me a master class in what to do and how to do it and push myself. I think *Know U* was the best of me at that point and it was definitely them steering the ship and me just sitting back and learning and have a writing experience where that five-song EP it really put things into perspective and as I've grown since then I'm now more comfortable with my sound and more confident in what I'm doing. This project *MUSE (ic)* was me actually steering my own ship with the help of my brother Errick Lewis who was a wonderful guide this whole process. He co-produced this project with me but this is an expression of me doing what I want to do the way that I want to do it and making the final decisions and making the calls that I want and this is a full expression of me so that's what's different between *Know U* and *MUSE (ic)*.

**What was the experience of recording *MUSE (ic)* as a whole?**

It was almost surreal. The beginnings of the project is one of those moments and I've said this before it's like an outlier moment, are you familiar with the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell?

**Yes.**

So you know how in every sector he talks about how success is a function of so many factors but ultimately their preparation was key in making the best of their circumstances. I think me making the decision to move from Houston to New York to put myself out there and just be out be seen put me in places where I was able to meet the right people at the right time and the best people I could meet. The whole process is crazy how it happened. So Matthew Harnett did horns on this project he plays trombone and he played with Bilal, Lauryn Hill he played with lots of people. I know Matt from Houston we did a couple of gigs together so when I moved here he was like there is a jam session and I want you to help me host it. I did that when I got here and eventually, Matt ended up moving back to Houston so I continued hosting the jam session here so there I met Errick Lewis who is the bass player. He came to a jam session and I was just amazed by his playing and found out that was his first weekend in the city I found out he just moved from the west coast. At the time he was living in a house in New Jersey renting a room with a guy named Bigmore Thomas who also played with Lauryn Hill he's just an incredible arranger and composer and he had a basement where it was a space to record they had a drum set down there.

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It was like let's record these songs down in the basement. I went down there me, Errick and Bobby Weston Our drummer

canceled on us at the last minute so Errick got on the phone and found Obed Cavalier who played drums down there and is one of the best drummers in the world so much that he doesn't have social media but has his own hashtag because people tag him.



So he came through and the first song we played was "Raindrops." I think the first or second take is what's actually on the record and this is like within 10 minutes of meeting each other. That was like wow this can really be something the last element we brought into it Miles Roberson I met him on a wedding gig that I did and it just so happened they wanted music during the dinner which never happens. They just wanted us to vibe out so I was like what do you want play. We just vibed so well that I told him I was working on this project a week or two after and I told him I would just love for him to come down. He came and he just fit right in and it turns out that he used to be Adele's music director.

So I say all that to say that was the whole process. The other musicians that I brought in Matt Hartnett who played horns Idris Frederick who played organ on a song and Will Holden who played flute on the song "Muse (ic)" those were the only parts that we didn't do at once together in the same room. But even those interactions were like a mutual respect for one another and we use that energy to build so when you ask that question it was transformational for me. It will honestly affect the way that I record everything moving forward like if I don't have that same feeling it's just not gonna hit me.

**I guess that would be like divine serendipity.**

It is, it's evidence of god if you were to ask me what is your idea of we started recording this in February of 2018 just working weekends sometimes during the week. If you had asked me then what do I want this to sound like what I

would've given you would've been far less than what's there because I've been limited by our own experiences and our own understanding to allow others to affect us we can really express our best selves because we don't fully understand our capabilities until we see it with others and I think that's why it's important to let your light shine and go be a muse and see who's affected by you and who you're affected by.

**"Raindrops" is my favorite song so far, the album did feel a little like a jam session at times like maybe a sense of community instead of a more rigid type thing.**

It's interesting that's what I was totally going for I'm glad that that translates whether people add a negative or a positive connotation to it , it's going to meet them wherever it needs to. It's one of those things I really had to decide along this journey what do I really want to tie myself to for lack of a better phrase what hell do I want to die on do I wanna be the art for art's sake guy or do I want to make something that everybody's going to like. And I think I fell in a place of this is expression and it's been difficult to get like on your playlist and things like that because you know I have an album that has an eight-minute song and another seven-minute song and a six-minute song and a song that says nigga like 50 times and it's mad and angry but I think it's like necessary for art to exist in a space where it can truly be what it should be and not watered down to meet the tastes of what people say we want.

I don't necessarily think people want three minutes and 40 seconds I don't think people's attention spans are short I think people just don't have something to keep their focus I listen to "Raindrops" and I forget that it's seven minutes and when it's over I want to play it again and that's been the feedback I've gotten from people. Some people will look at it and be like man I'm not going to listen to that and other people understand like hey this is

expression. Iâ€™m a realist and I understand itâ€™s not going to be for everybody sometimes we think that we need to be for everybody we donâ€™t need to be for everybody but you need to be for the right people. I think the right people will find you itâ€™s just about you doing the work to get it in front of them Iâ€™m willing to do that work and I understand. I mixed this record and mastered myself so I can understand what itâ€™s gonna take and whoâ€™s going to appreciate this you know I make music not just for this moment and I want the music to last. So if I donâ€™t ever see it in my life thatâ€™s cool because I know itâ€™s going to be there because itâ€™s quality work. As long as somebodyâ€™s playing it.



**Can you tell me a little bit more about â€œRaindrops?â€**

Itâ€™s about being there for someone when they need you. When itâ€™s rough and itâ€™s heavy and things are happening to you youâ€™re the one I call on to be there to be that protector the person who shields from that provides that umbrella. When the tears roll down your face itâ€™s about crying thatâ€™s raindrops. Itâ€™s about being there and I think that itâ€™s something that really essential now especially since thereâ€™s so much of an attack on people for differences now. Itâ€™s not just about romantic relationships but itâ€™s about those fears that you have and showing up for people and I hope people get that from it and if they donâ€™t one day they will. Iâ€™m all for music meeting you wherever you may be thatâ€™s what makes great music. You can grow with a song and change the meaning to you. I think that is the perfect balance.

**Is there any song that you have a great attachment to on this project?**

â€œRaindropsâ€ particularly because that was the first song that we did together as a unit. I think we spent the rest of time chasing raindrops. We were like if we canâ€™t put this on



a project with "Raindrops" it doesn't need to be here. I hold that really highly I revere that song because it forced me to be like this is our baseline and I feel like every song on the project is quality I think each song holds its own place.

### **What is the status of the next EP from the Herbivores?**

We wanted to come out with it a little sooner but once we laid everything out and we realized that we each had individual projects that we're working on as well which is something that we see as an asset to our collective. I think Red has a project he's working on. We're in the process of finalizing all the mixes this week and it's really solid some of my best writing I have done. I think we are planning to have that out in December right around our birthdays Misha and I share the same birthday December 11<sup>th</sup> and I think that our birthday falls on a Friday this year. It's going to be called *Nightshades* and it's much deeper. This is the deeper heavier side of love. My favorite song on it is called "Weak Bone."

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