

Nova Talks New Album, Afrobeats & Home



Nova like so many artists of the past year has used the seclusion brought on by the pandemic to enjoy and delve even deeper into his creative work. His last full-length project, the *S.T.A.Y.* EP was released in 2019. The native Nigerian has been living in Toronto and using his new residence to build upon his Afrobeats sound that melds sonic parts of the diaspora together into song. The genre which uses electronic sounds and acknowledges things like hip-hop is different from the organic horns and unaltered voices of Afrobeat which is credited to Fela Kuti and Tony Allen. As a millennial Nigerian Nova is an artist in the midst of both approaches. This year he is getting ready for the follow-up to *S.T.A.Y.* and today “Precious Diamond” featuring Katasha J is the first preview into the album. Nova spoke to me about his new music, the growth of the Afrobeats sound, life in Lagos, Fela Kuti and how Toronto has influenced him.

“I think it’s a great time to be an African artist”

Is Precious Diamond about love only? And how did it come together with Katasha J?

It came together through my cousin I was hanging out with him and his housemate and he told me he just met this artist names Katasha. I had never heard of her before. He said it would be great if we could work and connect together and at the time I was in the process of getting my project together so I had a couple of beats I was going through I started working on this

template for a song. I had the core idea down but I hadn't spent much time developing that idea so I connected with Katasha I reached out to her and the day we met we were just vibing I played her some of the stuff I was working on I recorded a rough body for some and as soon as I played her that beat I hadn't recorded it at all I just had an idea for the chorus it just seemed perfect from her vibe and my vibe as well and it felt like synergy so we started writing the song and we were actually able to finish recording it the same day that we met.

And what would you say the song is actually about?

It's like that special moment for couples it's like you have this connection and for me the chorus "I see I can't help it I want you to myself" that was just kind of saying for me a lot of my music is about the millennial dating experiences right now and conversations I've had with friends about what they're going through and some of us being influenced by lyrics so I kind of felt like we're at a point where people are scared of connections instead of being vulnerable during the pandemic so the lyrics were about someone coming out of their shell and being like "I really want this."

You speak on millennials and love during the pandemic what is your overall take on it?

I think it's real interesting because the pandemic has been a really weird time for everyone. I think something that's really important right now is to have connections with people. I find that with the popularity of dating apps now for instance it's kind of a situation where you are talking to so many people at the same time and it almost becomes kind of difficult to cut through that void and to get those genuine connections that we all crave sometimes or maybe we don't crave. So for me it's an interesting dynamic of those people who create connections and the people who have this defense

mechanism where they try to protect themselves from vulnerability so for me just explaining all those things from different perspectives and on the album thatâ€™s what I do. â€œPrecious Diamondâ€ is really leaning more into the vulnerable side Iâ€™m letting someone know that I genuinely value them.

I can see that you have Ghanian and American ancestry. You are born in England but raised in Nigeria. You have an international perspective on music who and what have been your creative influences?

I remember being 17 -years old in Nigeria and the criticism I used to get was that my music sounded very national I took that as a compliment because that was letting me know that I donâ€™t fit into the sound but I do know how to process that information because a lot of my influences I grew up listening to people like 50 Cent, people like Lil Wayne, Lauryn Hill I also listened to people like Wyclef. My uncle was great at exposing me to music. I was listening to that music really young.

But then I grew up and I really started appreciating people like Drake, The Weeknd and people like Wizkid. I would say my favorite artist right now probably like Burna Boy and J. Cole. J.Cole is incredible. And to me, Burna Boy is just like another level the way he creates music and expresses himself.

How would describe the current Afrobeats movement that has people like Wizkid and Tiwa Savage and do you see your music as a part of that wave?

I think what weâ€™ve seen happen with the Afrobeats genre over the last five years has kind of been similar to what we saw happen to dancehall music and in the early 2000s with people like Sean Paul and Beenie Man. I think itâ€™s a great time to be an African artist, I think itâ€™s a beautiful thing but at the same time I find that the Afrobeats genre itself has so

many dimensions to it that people previously didn't understand it like in terms of the African artists we're talking about so I feel like there is room for it to be less of a box in terms of it just being Afrobeats because there's definitely elements of R&B, there's definitely elements of hip-hop definitely the fact that people feed into their music even though it's from the Afrocentric perspective I feel like there's room for expansion.

I told you I got feedback about my music sounding international so that's was interesting so for me I have a really interesting background and that background has the ability to make music accessible and relatable to different places in the world and I'm in Toronto right now and Toronto is a city that is so diverse. When you are walking down the street there's a strong chance the people walking with you are from different places around the world. So to me, that experience is amazing to be able to groom my sound and make connections with people from different backgrounds and different experiences. I feel like that influences me to want to contribute.

“Fela has had the biggest influence on Nigerian music having inspired a whole generation”

I was going to ask you how Toronto is inspiring your sound because it's so different from Ghana, Nigeria and America. How long have you been there?

I've been here three years and it's interesting that you ask that question. I feel like me moving to Toronto was a risk but that's something I'm willing to do I think you can hear the influences in my sound. The first project I released when I got here was the *S.T.A.Y.* album which I released in 2019. I could hear the evolution of my sound hearing how the city influenced my choice of beats and how I speak about

certain situations just experiencing my personal life and things Iâ€™ve been through and actually informed the way I do music compared to Lagos is where spent most of my life where I grew up and itâ€™s a very very fast-paced city so everyone is moving at 100 at a very intense pace and thereâ€™s really no time to chill. Moving here is an interesting switch up because even though Toronto is a fast-paced city the intensity level is not like Lagos there is time to think regroup and process information. To me thatâ€™s been the most interesting thing getting to learn more about myself. Iâ€™ve been in new situations that I wasnâ€™t in Nigeria. I really love the city of Toronto I enjoy being here so far and I definitely look forward to connecting with more people in the community here and the music community.

Isnâ€™t there a house and hip hop scene in Lagos?

Yes, there is a huge Afro-house scene thereâ€™s also a very good hip-hop scene in Lagos which are super-vibrant you can hear so many sounds and you see sounds go from like bubbling under to crossing over into the mainstream. The club culture in Lagos is huge. In Lagos a night out with friends youâ€™re definitely not going to one club chances are you are going to four or five different places whatâ€™s interesting about that is you get exposed to a range of music and you can go to a space that is predominately Afro-house you can go somewhere that is more international music.

Were you reared on Fela Kuti growing up?

I really donâ€™t think there is any Lagosian that would not be familiar with his music. Fela has had the biggest influence on Nigerian music having inspired a whole generation. I also think about it like when Fela was younger he actually tried to run for president when my parents were teenagers. To me, thatâ€™s interesting because I try to imagine someone like Wizkid or Burna Boy running for president in my time. It seems far fetched but this is something that happened in their time

thatâ€™s how amazing the man was he inspired a generation.

When I was younger his music was always a part of the Lagos lifestyle when youâ€™re at home, when youâ€™re in dinner spaces you hear Felaâ€™s music itâ€™s like itâ€™s essentially the soundtrack to the city which is interesting because he is so very very relevant today. Unfortunately, things Fela was specifically talking about in his music weâ€™re still seeing the government act the same way. The people that he was speaking of in his music are still in power. He is an Afrobeat legend the greatest to ever do it.

So â€œPrecious Diamondâ€ will be on your fourth album. What can you tell me about the album?

Itâ€™s been really interesting working on this project. The pandemic has been a delay for the entire world however it gave me a unique opportunity to zone in on my music and just like focus on that and keep an open mind. I collaborated with producers in Nigeria, producers in England and the states too. So it was a very digital process sending files back and forth and being able to build that connection with people who are not in the same environment as me. The only person I met in person to record was Katasha. Everyone else I worked with I worked with Bankyondbeatz heâ€™s a producer Iâ€™ve been working with my entire career heâ€™s based in Lagos, Nigeria. I also worked with Toye Aru, I recorded about four or five songs with Toye that are on the album heâ€™s based in the states and he sent me the beats and I was like this is amazing.



I also connected with Otee Beatz heâ€™s based in South Africa heâ€™s also a Nigerian producer so that whole process of being able to connect with people virtually create content together was definitely an interesting process. Some artists that I worked with Katasha on â€œPrecious Diamondâ€ I also worked

with Esquire Mst heâ€™s also a Canadian-based artist as well from Nigeria. I also connected with Arenye heâ€™s also a Canadian-based artist as well from Nigeria. They all add interesting elements to the songs because on the first three albums I didnâ€™t actually collaborate with anyone in terms of artists like itâ€™s just my voice on the entire album for me it was an interesting journey just being able to do that being able to take people on a journey. I felt like the artists who worked on the album were a perfect fit.

Will the sound be like â€œPrecious Diamondâ€ which to me sounds more like a hybrid of between R&B and something else?

I think thatâ€™s something consistent with all my music. My diverse background being exposed to different cultures I think itâ€™s a reflection of my personality and who I am. I started off doing music rapping but as I progressed I fell in love with melodies and I continue to explore that but now Iâ€™m kind of with my sound where Iâ€™m able to diffuse my earlier inspirations with my new sound now and create music. A song I worked on with Esquire Mst which is called â€œChardonnay & Marijuanaâ€ we were able to create this hybrid of the bonds of traditional hip-hop but with an R&B twist and for me thatâ€™s what I love.

Do you have a title and release date for it yet?

Yes, itâ€™s a follow-up to the first *S.T.A.Y.* project and itâ€™s called *S.T.A.Y. 2*. Regarding the timeline, I donâ€™t have a definite timeline at the moment. Maybe for summer but I will see how things go between now and then but Iâ€™m also dropping another song apart from â€œPrecious Diamondâ€ called â€œCanâ€™t Complainâ€ and I collaborated with Fasino on that. Fasino is a Nigerian artist in the UK and I feel like he was able to bring something different to that song. That core Afrobeats element and a fusion with R&B and hip-hop.

Do you feel like the Afrobeats movement growing do you see it

being bigger maybe even full-on mainstream?

I feel like this is an amazing time for Afrobeats music not just from the perspective of the Afrobeats artists but international artists as well. Something Iâ€™m starting to hear a lot as well is that one song targeted to the Afrobeats market from a range of artists. Iâ€™m seeing obviously Beyonce with *The Lion King* album, weâ€™ve seen Drake explore that sound, French Montana and Swae Lee so we are seeing these collaborations happen more and more often. When it started about 10 years ago with Dâ€™banj signing to Kanye West and G.O.O.D. Music that was a really pivotal moment in Afrobeats because I feel that really opened the door for Afrobeats artists. people like Wizkid and Burna Boy are just taking it to the next level and continued to gain momentum for Afrobeats.

Do you think people of the diaspora are connecting through this music but I know that is redundant because we just talked about these collaborations? And do you think the genre seeping into pop culture at this time might bring more attention to Africa?

Thatâ€™s a really important question. What Iâ€™ve noticed more Being here in Toronto that people of the diaspora feel more connected to home and they identify more with their culture because the music has a platform and itâ€™s not something that is within the diaspora space it has broken out of it. Â You could meet someone from Europe or even North America whoâ€™s listening to Wizkid and Burna Boyâ€™s music and they are giving you recommendations on what to listen to so that created a sense of community and a sense of pride among the diaspora here and made it easier to be proud of where youâ€™re from and your background but also learning about whatâ€™s going on back home you know because people like Burna Boy are able to articulate the situation in the context of being an African so well and he did that amazingly on the *African Giant* album so I feel like Afrobeats has definitely played a huge

role in making people identify with that and I think that things like that led to us seeing a movie like Black Panther being made I think music played an important role in that we can see how entertainment gives people that sense of pride and sense of connection.

I just did want to add one little thing I forget to mention that apart from the mainstream there is an entire subculture of people creating music in Nigeria who are pushing boundaries back and it's unfair to confine to Afrobeats and they are really making innovative music in that space.Â Â

Can you name some of those artists?

Tay Iwar is amazing he was featured on the Wizkid album Tems is also featured on the Wizkid album as well so those are two people who are incredible. One of my favorites is Santi his music is groundbreaking these are people whose music I enjoy because they are not trying to fit into a box. I'm just happy to see people continue to grow.

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Catching Up With Hil St. Soul (Interview)



Hilary Mwelwa's voice sounds like an old friend as it feels familiar, trustworthy and warm. As Hil St. Soul she has spent the past two decades making music inspired by love and life with respect to the traditions of R&B and her own creative affinities. Last year she surprised fans with the elevating cheer of "One Life." The song came out at the perfect time as the world had just gone into lockdown because of coronavirus. The call for a good time and weekend getaway was ideal for a safe party at home and a reminder that life is not over. Mwelwa started this year with an earthy interpretation of the Ohio Players' "Heaven Must Be Like This." She has been working on her next album and the new cover is on the way to that destination. I spoke with Mwelwa by phone and she shared bits of her COVID-19 life. In the following interview she revealed the sonic scope of her next project, listening choices and why she misses the mangos grown in her native Zambia.

"I love music I live it and breathe it so for me music is in my life every day"

Last year you reemerged with the single "One Life" how did that song bring you back onto the scene?

I know to the public it seems that I'm not around but

believe it or not I have been making music. It's just in various different projects I obviously would have loved for it to have a wider audience but I've been grinding in the background. But it just happens with "One Life" I collaborated with a producer called Reggie Myrix I met him in 2014. Noel Gourdin was releasing a single over here called "No Worries" and they were looking for a vocalist so one of my guys who does all the promos for a lot of artists contacted me and said "they are looking for a British artist would you be interested. So I heard the song and loved it so that's how I got introduced to Reggie.

We just kept in touch so a few years back I was in the US doing a mini-tour in 2018 so I hooked up with Reggie I was actually staying in Philly he's from New Jersey so he came down we hooked up and he spoke about doing a project together. When I got back to the UK he sent me a bunch of tracks and the backing track for "One Life" just immediately stood out for me I just gravitated towards that and put pen to paper and that was for his project so he was kind of like promoting it over here in the UK and then it found its way over to the US and then Shanachie got a hold of it. So it's been like an organic process I wasn't expecting anything to happen with the song but thankfully people latched on to it.

It's done well on the Sirius XM Heart & Soul chart.Â

Yes, you never really know what's gonna happen to a song until you put it out into the universe. I think people like this vibe because it has a very uplifting message with everything that's going on in the world right now I think we can all use that distraction.

What drew you to the Ohio Player's "Heaven Must Be Like This?"

I'm always recording covers but I'm always weary about doing covers just because you never know if you're doing the

right thing a lot of people tend to like the original versions. Eyebrows always raise when you do a cover. Randall said to me what do you think about doing this I was like let me just kind of vibe with it see how I get on with it because for me to cover a song I need to really connect with it and just feel like Iâ€™m going to bring something new or at least be able to put my stamp on it so when I heard the song I thought Iâ€™m obviously familiar with it but when you listen again you start to hear things you didnâ€™t before and I just thought what a beautiful composition I loved the overall vibe of it I just felt like it was a song I could definitely do something with I basically got a track from Prince Damon who is the producer when I heard that I really liked what he had done with it obviously the original is very laid back and chilled so I didnâ€™t really want to duplicate whatâ€™s been done already and I just kind of wanted to bring a fresh twist to it when I heard what he had done so I put my vocals on and it just worked I really didnâ€™t know how it was going to sound until I actually started recording it.

Itâ€™s almost like youâ€™re doing a painting and youâ€™re just kind of putting all the layers It just all came together nicely and I was happy with how it came out. Iâ€™m just glad that everybody feels the same way because the reaction Iâ€™ve had so far has really been amazing so Iâ€™m glad that people are digging it. As an artist, you canâ€™t really ask for more especially when you are doing covers.

How do you feel about the wave of virtual performances that popped up during the pandemic for obvious reasons? What you do feel about performing a virtual show?

The times that weâ€™re living in right now itâ€™s very challenging for everybody not just artists. But in terms, as an artist not being able to perform at live venues it is very

frustrating so I guess everybody's trying different ways to reach their audiences so I think it's a great thing. I haven't really done any myself but I think that's something I will be doing but I've obviously been working on putting product together and once I put it out and start sharing with everyone I probably will do that. We don't really have much of a choice right now but at the same time, it's a beautiful way to share what you're doing with your audience and stay connected with them.

What kinds of things have you been doing to survive this time? Is there any particular music including your own to offer comfort? How have you been coping?

I love music I live it and breathe it so for me music is in my life every day. I tend to listen to a lot of the old stuff I love listening to old music. My iTunes selection is quite eclectic so I listen to everything from New Jack Swing to neo-soul to old school, rare groove, you name it hip-hop I've got a mixture so you know. I do definitely listen to a lot of music since we're spending a lot of time indoors I do find that that uplifts me. It's like a distraction really cause sometimes when you kind of watching the news and you see what's going on out there it's quite depressing. I try to exercise to music because I'm not doing so much of that at the moment because we are stuck indoors. So yeah, music is everything to me and it plays a really important part in lifting my spirits and hopefully, it's the same for a lot of people even if they're not into my music it's just a great way to escape reality. I listen to music every day that's a very important part of my life.

It's been a long while since your *Soul Organic* debut, what have you noticed different about the UK soul scene?

It's evolved and become a lot more prominent. We've always been kind of known for creativity and our sound being very different from what goes on in the US. You guys do soul and

R&B you do it at that level we have always aspired to. I think weâ€™ve got a different kind of slant and approach to when weâ€™re creating music so it has a different style and I have definitely over the years seen the growth and evolution in that sound. To me, I came from in terms of soul music coming from the UK it was like Soul II Soul, Loose Ends and the Young Disciples but since then youâ€™ve got a whole heap of other artists who are doing their thing and have definitely put the UK on the map. There are a lot of British artists who have and are doing well in the US. Itâ€™s definitely bigger and better.

Is there anyone in particular that you like thatâ€™s contemporary?

An artist thatâ€™s really kind of pricked my ears is this young lady called Cleo Soul. I really like her vibe because sheâ€™s really kind of quirky and different so Iâ€™ve been listening to her stuff a lot but then I listen to people like Omar, Donnie, Terri Walker, but I suppose in the most current climate I would say Cleo Soul and I like Mahalia as well. She has a nice vibe to what she does thereâ€™s a lot of great artists out here some of them I havenâ€™t touched upon but there is a lot of good music coming out of the UK.

Can you describe the sound?

People say that I have a particular sound but I really just like to touch on all the things that have influenced me. It will be what people are used to hearing in terms of Hil St. Soul but maybe just a little bit of a twist. Like I said Iâ€™ve been dabbling in soulful house so thereâ€™s some of elements of that in the songs, a few acoustic vibes, back in 2018 I went back to Zambia because thatâ€™s where I was born that's where my parents live so I took a year out and I worked with some local musicians so there will be a little bit of my traditional music so Iâ€™m just trying to include all of the things all of the music that has influenced me throughout my life. So there will be a little bit of a Zambian vibe to my

music. That's why it's taking so long because I'm trying to challenge myself. I'm busy busy trying to consolidate all of these ideas and just hopefully make a wonderful body of work. So hopefully you guys won't have to wait too much longer to hear it.

Do you go home to Zambia a lot?

Yes, I do. I did quite regularly until recently. I try to go once a year. I try to go as often as I can. I was supposed to go there in March actually I had my flight booked and everything. I wanted to go in December but they put us in lockdown again so I'm just kind of waiting for a window to open. It's just very scary times because a lot of people have been affected by this virus including myself I've had family members, unfortunately, succumb to it. My parents are not young they are elderly so I'm quite eager to spend time with them because you just don't know what's around the corner.

Is there anything about your home that you like better than the UK or vice-versa?

Yeah, funny enough some people say the weather. The weather is amazing out in Zambia but October November it's unbearably hot my skin's so used to the cold now I just find it a bit uncomfortable. That said the weather is beautiful but for me it's very open in terms of the space there's a lot of outdoor space you feel kind of freer. But my favorite thing of all because I am a mango lover Zambian mangos are out of this world. We usually get them in December so that's definitely on top of my list. My mother's got like an orchard of them and we just pick loads of them and I can just eat bucketloads of mangos because when you have the mangos here in the UK there's just no flavor whatsoever so you just eat it because you're craving a mango but it's just not the same experience. The other thing is when you're eating mango in

the heat itâ€™s a different vibe altogether and you canâ€™t do that in the UK because itâ€™s always cold.

One of my favorite songs of yours is your duet with Dwele, â€œCome Over.â€ Do you have any plans or dream collaborations?

As an artist, you do have like a little kind of bucket list of who you would love to work with. You tend to do a lot of these collaborations on the road because this is when you get to meet a lot of these artists. Iâ€™m a huge fan of Stokley from Mint Condition I love his vibe. Thereâ€™s so many people off the top of my head I love Dâ€™Angelo, I love Jill Scott.

Plans and parting words?

Iâ€™ve been busy trying to get an album finished my main goal all this time. Iâ€™ve been releasing some music Iâ€™ve done some soulful house stuff and I loved it, it was very different for me. Thereâ€™s a producer over here named Brian Power who puts out some great stuff and Iâ€™ve put some stuff out with those guys. I worked with a guy from Amsterdam DJ Deefus we did a song called â€œHold On.â€ Aside from that Iâ€™ve definitely been working on completing my next album Iâ€™m three-quarters of the way there. Itâ€™s just that Iâ€™m quite picky and fussy things tend to take a little bit longer but getting there but the end goal is to get an album out in the not too distant future.

I would like to thank my fans whoâ€™ve been with me on this journey because I know I have not been very present but Iâ€™ve always been out there doing my thing youâ€™re always thankful because I know I have a great following out there. Thank everybody and I hope theyâ€™re keeping safe in these crazy times. I hope they find solace listening to my music and other music out there as well. Do look for my forthcoming album, I havenâ€™t got a date for it or a title but itâ€™s coming. The pandemic has stopped everybody in their tracks but Iâ€™ve

become more determined to get this project finished. I look forward to hitting the stage again.

Follow Hil St. Soul on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and her [Official Site](#).

The Herbivores Release Nightshades EP (Interview)



This past summer the [Herbivores](#) released their debut EP and became one of many artists to lift spirits with music during the pandemic. The bright tones and lyrics about fresh love were the kind of energy needed during a year of chaos and political confusion. Will Sacks, Bel-Ami, Misha Savage and Reddaz compiled their histories with love and put the songs into two collections reflecting the stages of a relationship. Bel-Ami quickly followed the first EP with his [Muse \[ic\]](#) album.

The excitement of new romance fades on their current [Nightshades](#) EP and the more difficult moments of love are on display. *Nightshades* is literally about shadow work, meaning the things we don't necessarily like about ourselves, owning them and transforming self. The psychiatrist Carl Jung gets credit for the idea but artists have been looking inside since forever. In part two of our conversation, the band openly shares the creative processes behind the frustrations and vulnerabilities embedded in *Nightshades*'s emotionally fearless soul. Â

“The best piece of advice my mom ever gave me is that patience is something that you do not something you have”-Will

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So everything that grows in the light has a shadow and I think that is a great analogy for the ups and downs of relationships as you all stated in the press release. How did you all get to that idea?Â

Reddaz: The last EP that we did was really happy because we were going to release an LP but we had all of those songs ready to go but due to the whole pandemic situation we decided to split it into two different projects. So when we were planning to put the project together we decided that the songs for the first EP was gonna be more happy in terms of meeting somebody and getting to know them just like the fresh start to a relationship. And then with the second portion of the EP it was much more emotional because of the song content and the different aspects we were coming up with so it was much more of an emotional rollercoaster for this portion of the project but we actually had this planned out since the beginning of the year.

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That was my next question so the decision to split up the songs really was a response to the pandemic? How did you decide to release the music as two EPs instead of one full-length album?Â

Reddaz: Yeah we had a bunch of tour dates and stuff like that but at the end of the day we made the best of it to keep the connection going keep the chemistry going where we were able

to still create and do all the work we can do.

Will: If you talked to us at the beginning of February we would be saying that weâ€™re releasing all 11 songs together as one unit but we kind of sat down when the pandemic hit and we had to cancel our spring tour. We said Ok we can put people in a better mindset because we have these much heavier songs more stressful songs and at that point we made the conscious decision to put something of light into the world to kind of sit with these moodier ones until this winter.

Its funny because that first EP really does match the summer and *Nightshades* matches winter. Did you learn anything new about the conflicts we experience in love while making this music?

Misha: I think the most curious thing that I learned was an interpersonal thing with the group about how different people experience love and the different types of relationships that people are accustomed to or used to the writing would be the entire record to showcase how each of us as individuals have endured relationships in our lives. I wanna say thereâ€™s one song specifically on the upcoming record â€œRosesâ€ thatâ€™s going to be coming out that I was specifically really taken aback by just the sheer magnitude of difference in experiences that myself and Will had in dealing with love and how itâ€™s come about in our lives and the way that it was expressed. I would say without being too wordy just really really understanding the magnitude of love and how many different people can experience it and I think that this record really showcases those different aspects in really honest and genuine ways.



Bel-Ami: This record definitely illuminated a few things about myself. Â I think the songs on here fall from different spaces and how I experience things and came to those understandings.

I learned about myself in creating the songs particularly “Weak Bones” it’s frustration it is also like, like having a Eureka moment as well and all of this it was definitely a stretch for me. I didn’t think that I could write something like that and I didn’t know how comfortable I felt sharing and being vulnerable enough to let people into that side of the love that I’ve experienced as well so throughout this process I’ve learned a lot about myself. And what each of these other men have experienced and how they are dealing with themselves.

Who is singing lead on “Mama’s Nose?” and did you your moms really school you about patience? We don’t hear enough about mothers schooling their sons about relationships in songs?

Reddaz: That would be me. Honestly, I’ve had these conversations with my mother and the thing about it is unless I feel I’m in a really serious relationship I don’t bring her home to mom because you’ve got to make sure it’s the correct one and knowing who you’re dealing with. I’ve had that conversation.

Will: The best piece of advice my mom ever gave me is that patience is something that you do not something you have. That’s something that has always stuck with me and this came at a very rough time for us and helped us as a unit me, Misha and Red writing a song. I think it was February two years ago we started writing that. It was sort of like a mantra we could carry forward into the future. Â

“One thing I’ve learned about marriage is oftentimes what you seek in the other person most of the times the issues that you see in the other person are issues with yourself”-Bel-AmiÂ

I notice that even though there is a lot of frustration thereâ€™s still vulnerability on a song like â€œRoses?â€

Will: It was something that I wrote about four years ago sitting on the shelf never sitting with my voice so I sent it to Amir and it sounded so much better than I ever could. It came from thinking of a past fling we kind of fell out kind of miraculously and crazily. We were really tight for about six months and one day she was gone. I found out later that she may have had an abortion.

Bel-Ami: First of all I want to say it was a privilege to be able to communicate the feeling that Will had in â€œRoses.â€ The only two songs Iâ€™ve ever sung other people have written have been â€œRosesâ€ and â€œRunning In Placeâ€ and these are both Willâ€™s joints you know when Iâ€™m tasked with communicating someone elseâ€™s experience itâ€™s a big deal for me. Seeing how heavy â€œRosesâ€ is I definitely donâ€™t take it lightly.

A lot of R&B is influenced by hip-hopâ€™s need to be invulnerable, how do you get to the self-reflexiveness to write a song like â€œBoomerangâ€ where youâ€™re talking about things coming and accountability in love?

Bel-Ami: â€œBoomerangâ€ one thing Iâ€™ve learned about marriage is oftentimes what you seek in the other person most of the times the issues that you see in the other person are issues with yourself. A lot of times we misplace that disappointment or those feelings of anger or resentment that you may have towards the other person so I look at â€œWeak Bonesâ€ and â€œBoomerangâ€ as opposite ends of the spectrum. One is Iâ€™m so maybe you canâ€™t handle this, maybe this is not for you and then â€œBoomerangâ€ is saying maybe this person can but maybe itâ€™s just you, youâ€™re the cause of your own frustration so I wanted to present a different aspect. I really try to be as honest as I can in my music and with my writing and thatâ€™s one the things that Iâ€™ve

learned over the past few years that it's less about what the other person needs to change and it's more about what you need to change in order to make yourself feel better about yourself.

So is the end of the story at two parts or will there be another like a trilogy?

Will: We're in writing mode right now. Our goal is to write 48 songs and to release the very best 10 of them. So for this next project which we're calling Photosynthesizers is different beats the crÃ"me de la crÃ"me the best we can possibly do right now.



Ok, so going back to our first conversation, now that you've mentioned Nightshades and Photosynthesis regarding the Herbivores concept do any of you have gardens, plant-eaters? Or is it also a 420 thing?

Misha: It's legal, and one in three every Americans!

Will: Misha and I were roommates and we were talking about band names and we were talking about how Amir was at the time a strict gluten-free vegan and he was an herbivore and it kind of landed on that. But I will also add that I love gardening. I have a pink lemon tree and two passionfruit plants in my living room.

You have lamps for them?

Will: Oh yeah they hate Brooklyn but me and my girlfriend sprouted two of these passionfruits from seeds. I have a very parental relationship with my citrus.

Bel-Ami: That's just a part of it Will has a full ass garden. For someone who lives in New York City he has blueberries, strawberries, peppers some jalapenos.

Will: We make a run of hot sauce cause not many people know the name cayenne.

You have earthboxes?

Will: At the time it was me, my girlfriend and Misha and we had planters in the backyard. I still have a blackberry plant that was We had a blueberry plant, a blackberry plant, and we had a strawberry plant we had lemon drop peppers cayenne peppers, habaneros, and the cayenne the guy just gave to me at the shop because it was in such bad shape.

So whatâ€™s next especially now that weâ€™re probably going to be in the house for another six months?

Bel-Ami: Just creating like Will said weâ€™re trying to pump out as many songs as we can so that when the world does open up weâ€™ll be ahead of it.

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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

"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"

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. Iâ€™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?

Dâ€™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 Iâ€™ve been influenced by â€™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 thereâ€™s been so many people who have influenced me but definitely, those who have influenced me the most like those early 2000â€™s neo-soul artists the Maxwells, the Bilals the Dâ€™Angelos.

So going back how did you start singing?

Iâ€™ve always sung. My grandmother use to have a camcorder and I think the earliest video Iâ€™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.

"It's about being there and I think that it's something that is really essential now especially since there's so much of an attack on people for differences now"

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 Iâ€™ve said this before itâ€™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 heâ€™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.

“I donâ€™t necessarily think people want three minutes and 40 seconds I donâ€™t think peopleâ€™s attention spans are short I think people just donâ€™t have something to keep their focus”

It was like letâ€™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 doesnâ€™t have social media but has his own hashtag because people tag him.



So he came through and the first song we played was â€œRaindrops.â€ I think the first or second take is whatâ€™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 Adeleâ€™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 â€œMuse (ic)â€ those were the only parts that we didnâ€™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 donâ€™t have that same feeling itâ€™s just not gonna hit me.

I guess that would be like divine serendipity.

It is, itâ€™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 wouldâ€™ve given you wouldâ€™ve been far less than whatâ€™s there because Iâ€™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 donâ€™t fully understand our capabilities until we see it with others and I think thatâ€™s why itâ€™s important to let your light shine and go be a muse and see whoâ€™s affected by you and who youâ€™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.

Itâ€™s interesting thatâ€™s what I was totally going for Iâ€™m glad that that translates whether people add a negative or a positive connotation to it , itâ€™s going to meet them wherever it needs to. Itâ€™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 artâ€™s sake guy or do I want to make something that everybodyâ€™s going to like. And I think I fell in a place of this is expression and itâ€™e 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 itâ€™s mad and angry but I think itâ€™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 donâ€™t necessarily think people want three minutes and 40 seconds I donâ€™t think peopleâ€™s attention spans are short I think people just donâ€™t have something to keep their focus I listen to “Raindrops” and I forget that itâ€™s seven minutes and when itâ€™s over I want to play it again and thatâ€™s been the feedback Iâ€™ve gotten from people. Some

people will look at it and be like man Iâ€™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 can'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 11th 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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