Jack White – Boarding House Reach

Radio Interview Transcript

1. Part of that was wanting to stay home with my children whilst they are in the single digit ages – spend as much time with them as possible. That was a big impetus and then I just did so many records at such high speed, I knew that even years ago in a couple more records I’m gonna have to take a little bit of a break before I just burn myself out through exhaustion so it was a good timing for all of that.
2. I rented an apartment in Nashville and set up all the gear I had when I was a teenager – the same four track and mixer as when I was 14 or 15. And I thought what would I do then if I knew what I know now, would I do anything differently? Would it sound better? I would go to this apartment every once in a-while by myself, no distractions, and write. And I would also try to write without any type of instrument accompaniment, just write from my gut or from my head, and just start humming melodies and making words and writing a song like that. Cause I got the feeling when I was watching this Michael Jackson ‘This Is It’ documentary – which if you haven’t seen is well worth seeing, I’ve seen it about seven times now – but he was talking to the band members. And it made me seem like I’ve never seen Michael play an instrument and he was not saying notes to people – he was going “it goes like this d-d-d-dum-dum, d-d-d-dum-dum”. He’s not telling them what notes to play he’s just humming what he feels, or the song is, and I thought that’s a great way to attack music, I should try to write like that and just ignore chords and notes and instruments and just think it up. So that’s what I did. I would hum the melody, I would sing the lyrics and then I would go back and overdub. And I couldn’t make noise for the neighbours, so I couldn’t use real drums or an amplifier, so I had to go straight into the board with a drum machine and a keyboard. And I would just try and go along with what I sang. And I didn’t know what key the song was in, so I had to guess – “oh it’s in the key of G, that’s interesting?” my brain reverts to the key of G when not hindered by an instrument, which is pretty funny.
3. While I was recording one of those songs in the apartment I asked Lillie Mae who played fiddle in my band – I just finished producing her album – I asked her if she would come over and put fiddle on this song ‘cause it was kind of a country idea. And she came over and - I’m setting everything up, I’m also pressing record – so I had to reach across her to press the record button and I said, “pardon my boarding house reach,” and she asked what does that mean? And I was explaining to her the phrase, she goes you should name your album that, that’s funny, so I did name it. For people who haven’t heard it before it’s sort of a thing, if you lived in a boarding house the owners would maybe cook dinner every night for all the boarders, and if you hadn’t paid your rent and you’re on this side of the table the good food would be put on the other side of the table because you haven’t paid your rent. So you have to reach across to get the good food. There’s a scene in the movie Yankee Doodle Dandy actually where they actually do this – the boarding people won’t let the Cohen family get the good food – and then he comes in and says, “we just sold the show,” and they get to have the nice entree like everyone else.
4. I think I rented that apartment for over a year, once in a while, and every couple of weeks I would go there. And it was great because I have a studio at my house but there’s usually someone knocking on the door every ten minutes, or something’s happening, or delivering a package, or y’know everyone knows where you are so they come get you cause we have a lot of things going on with Third Man all the time so this place nobody knew – I don’t have a phone – so they didn’t know where I am or when I’m coming back so it was really great freedom, to just go there and stay as long as I want with no distractions at all.
5. I always do that, it helps me create, to have some kind of barriers put up, some obstacles to overcome. I also knew that when I was going to get into the studio this time the songs were going to be so different and I was going to edit on computer – completely edit on computer – not record to computer or use plugins or anything like that but use it as an editing tool. So I recorded all these tracks on analogue tape in New York and LA – cities I’d never recorded in before, if you can believe it – and brought them back to Nashville and dumped them all on computer and started editing. It took months of editing to get these songs where they needed to be. They’re very complicated tracks, you know, they take a lot of left turns. They’re the kind of things that I say ‘oh if I had back in the day allowed myself to do that I would have done these same kind of editing ideas years ago’. But I wanted to stay on tape and edit with a razor blade to keep in that world to myself confined. So this time I thought I’m not going to let anything confine me – if I think of a sound I want, I think of an idea I want it to be there I don’t care what makes the sound if it’s a real guitar or a fake guitar, a real snare drum or a fake kick drum I don’t care this time I’m going to do whatever I imagine in my head. So that was really very dangerous and exciting at the same time because there’s a plethora of traps you can fall into when you open up those doors.
6. When I was recording in that apartment building I had to record quietly. I had to record with a drum machine instead of a real drum set so I was teaching myself how to use a drum machine. And then also when we went to New York and LA I was bringing loops of drum beats that I had recorded – I had recorded on real drum kits these snippets – 5 second, 10 second snippets, and I looped them and had the band play along with that drum beat. Like ‘respect commander’ and the song ‘corporation’ that’s me on drums. And then we had 2 other drummers add onto it – the drummer in New York he played on top of it, and the drummer in California she played on top of it so some of these songs have 3 or 4 drummers on them which is pretty funny.
7. I was looking through youtube clips. I wanted hip hop musicians who played with hip hop artists on stage. Like the band that backs up Kanye, the band that backs up JayZ on stage. Those are the musicians I want because in my imagination somebody who has a huge variance of genres that they’re familiar with and the ability to replicate samples with real instrumentation, so I thought those were the musicians who would be perfect for this if I could get a-hold of them. So I started looking through clips and saying “who’s this guy playing synths behind Kanye? Who’s that guy playing drums with Jay Z?” I called up Q-Tip and asked him, “Who’s the best drummer in New York?” All these ideas led from… well that guy’s not available, but there’s this other guy who’s even better, you should try this other guy. When we walked into the studio I thought oh man this could be a complete disaster, I don’t know who these people are, I don’t know if we’re going to be able to speak the same language. And it’s that old adage the language of music, you don’t need any words, you just speak the language of music. And in both cases we just came up with so much music so fast. I mean there’s hours and hours of music that these songs that are 3 minutes long had to be cut down from these 20-30 minute jam sessions down to something that people could relate to easier. The energy I was trying to feed off of was the energy of people who don’t know each other playing in the room for the first time, that didn’t really have much notice of what it was going to be, what we were going to do, they didn’t know what studio we were going to be at really, what kind of songs we were playing on. Everyone was on edge because they’re trying to impress each other, trying to find a commonality. You get this bizarre energy that you don’t after you’ve been playing in a band for years, you don’t get that kind of angst, that nervousness, so that was very exciting.
8. That’s how I felt when I was recording it at the apartment. The song was I’m Infected by Love, I kept saying ‘I’m infected by Love’ and this recording. But I thought oh this seems kind of negative, maybe people will make jokes about STDs or something… haha… so I thought how about we change it to connected by love and it becomes a very positive thing. And I think especially in the state we’re in now, Donald Trump and America, everyone seems so anti- everything and so divided that I thought it would maybe be nice to have a positive message with that. The trick was to try not to make the band too complicated, to keep it really simple. You know the Otis Redding style of soul – you just have the arpeggios ‘dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum’ – that simplicity where the singer carries the message. When I found out the cCrary Sisters lived in Nashville I thought that was great, they sang on all Dylan’s gospel albums – so they lived in the same town as me, Dominic my bass player reminded me that. I said oh that’s right they came out and did ‘Blowin In The Wind’ with Dylan when he came to town so we called them, they came over, it was incredible. I threw down a lot of stuff. At one song they threw down some things and we accidentally erased it… hahahaha… so we had to call them back, I’ve never done that before.
9. In the last couple of years I worked with Beyonce, Tribe Called Quest, Jay Z and I had worked on a lot of songs together. There’s a segment of music that’s there whether I know it or not. I mean growing up in Detroit that’s all you heard walking around on the street. The era of boom-boxes being popular that was on everybody’s front porch. So that stuff’s in my blood whether I like it or not. Just like Latin or Mexican music town, is in me even though I don’t know the names of those artists or what they’re saying, I don’t speak the language, but I know the rhythms and the melodies. So it felt good to finally be able to explore some of that. Because some of the riffs I’ve written and had recorded or demoed or whatever you call it, they don’t fit for any band of mine – they don’t fit for The Raconteurs, they don’t fit for The Dead Weather, my own thing. So I thought I wanna make them work, I wanna make these rhythms and riffs work. So you end up with an album like this, that has a lot of left turns, because every moment is some other type of character, some other type of story. I can imagine a lot of people having a hard time with some of these songs, because they take repeat listens to get into the groove of them, and I think that’s the place you wanna be as a songwriter. You want people to like the song the third time they hear it, not the first time they hear it. If they like something the first time they hear it, chances are it might fade away for them, it might become just a novel thing for the moment. But if they like it the third time they hear it, it might stay with them for life, you never know.
10. It’s interesting that the things you play when nobody’s around, you play things on guitar, things like I’d end up playing the Earth Wind and Fire riff while I’m sitting down playing guitar, or Megadeth or Sir Mix-a-lot or something. They’re just things that pop into your head and say oh I’ll see if you can play that. And you play it and you realise you’ve been playing and earth wind and fire riff for 20 minutes now. And its something I wouldn’t cover, I don’t need to reinterpret it for anybody, but it’s just those kinds of things that are in your blood that you wanna join in. Some musicians are wedding band musicians and they can play anything any time – hey play the temptations my girl and they’ll do it immediately. I’m not that kind of musician, I write kind of from the gut, and try to push myself into a character and make some kind of story out of it. You know I think people like David Bowie didn’t play that much on their own records, they synthesized people around them, and maybe that’s what happened here I don’t know. There’s a lot of synthesis of this bass player who seems to be very funky, with this drummer who seems to be very into hip hop beats, and someone like me who’s comes from a blues, folk, rock n roll, punk background -wherever I come from – and let’s find some common ground. I think corporation, that song, is a good example of that. I play the drums – it’s a drum loop – which we looped over and over again, which I’ve never done. I’ve never played to a drum loop before. And then the riff is very funky, it’s like a Parliament kind of thing, and then the vocals – which you think it’s an instrumental for 2 minutes – and then the vocals come on and they’re very angry punk lyrics, almost rapped in a hip-hop style, it’s sort of punk and hip-hop mix, it’s a very strange song. It’s not the sort of thing I’d play for my Mom. You have to find you way into it.
11. I think it’s nice that reminded me of this record the white stripes made – we had this song ‘Blue Orchid’ on there it was almost like, okay everybody here’s some candy for the rest of the sit down, keep the child interested so he’ll sit and listen to the rest of the record. But ‘Over and Over…’ is very bizarre because I’ve been working on that song for 13 years, I’ve never done that with any other song. I recorded that for Get Behind Me Satan, I recorded it for Icky Thump – the White Stripes records – I recorded it for the first two Raconteurs albums, I recorded it for The Dead Weather, I recorded it with Jay Z, I recorded it on my first solo album it never would work, it would just never came together. I couldn’t understand it, it became my white whale, I just kept chasing and chasing. I was about to say like enough is enough, I’m embarrassed to bring this out again, because people who’d played with me before would be like oh this one again? And we had this pedal we sell at Third Man – ironically or whatever the word is – but we sell this pedal called a bumble buzz at third man I plugged it in thinking “there’s no way this is going to be something I’ll like”. I plugged it in and was like oh my god that’s the sound of that riff I’ve been imagining this whole time and I’ve never put two and two together. And it finally worked, so I finally wrote vocals for the song and it really came together. The McCrary sisters got on there and did some amazing things, now I’m really, really proud of it, it’s really tough.
12. Oh it was about Sisyphus pushing this rock up and down the mountain and the only thing I could think of that went with that riff was “over and over”. When we worked with Jay Z on it he had written a song called Ray Bans out of it – I think his lyric was “under my ray bans” – so I was saying over and over when I was at home. But I didn’t have any other lyrics for it. Over and over made me think of Sisyphus pushing the rock up over and over on the mountain. It was very funny cause I had my ten-year-old son in the car, and I was listening to it and he said, “dad is this about that Greek god that keeps pushing this rock up and down?” Nearly stopped the car because I couldn’t believe it! Just as much as I wanted to stop the car when he was 8 years old and Van Halen’s ‘You Really Got Me’ was playing on the radio and he asked me why they were covering The Kinks? Haha. These are the moments where you wanna hug your son.
13. The music was so strange, and had New York and LA, and back home editing it altogether and once you edited all this stuff – a lot of them I didn’t write the vocals until I had it all edited because I had no idea where it was going to go. There’s a song on there called ‘Get In The Mind Shaft’ and I do vocals completely through a vocoder, which I’d never done before. And I just kept saying “can you hear me now?” and that was almost like an idea, do I have to go this far for you to pay attention? This character is saying do I have to go this far for you to pay attention to me, do I have to make my voice digital? In an age where everyone is auto tuned so you use those little moment to spur on more thought.
14. New York was Sear Sound, which is very compact, kind of a dustier, older studio, cramped and very, very inspiring. And then in LA we were in the Capital studio which is in the Capital Records Building which is very fancy and very clean and very nice. And that was great because we got to use these reverb chambers that Les Paul had designed and they’re underneath the parking lot. We got to have a tour to climb down this ladder and go and look at these reverb chambers that Les Paul designed and got to stand inside of them, and it was incredible. It was funny because you come in and you start recording and you have to mark off – I think there’s six of them or something, some number – and they say oh you can’t use 1, 3 and 5 today because the other studios are using them to send their signal down there so you can have 2 or 4. And then they say oh 5’s our favourite or whatever kind of thing. Just these kind of things that engineers would kill to see, that room, y’know in person and be in there and shout out loud, it’s just beautifully designed. And the records that were recorded there, the Frank Sinatra’s, pictures of Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps in the hallway, they recorded in the same spot, have you immediately starting playing Bebop alula and Baby Blue – we started and got the band all set up and it was inspiring to know – it’s just a place I’ve always wanted to go you know. Don Was was walking around, and they kept coming in and saying “wow I love what I’m hearing”, and I’d be like really? Okay, I’m not sure I love this! But okay! Just such bizarre melodies and tones. At one point we sped up, I think it was ‘Respect Commander’, we sped up the drums really fast and the engineer said, Bill Skibbe said, “I don’t think anybody can play this anymore, you won’t be able to play it live”. I just said well let’s back it off and have it right at the cusp of not being able to play it live. And that’s a good spot to be in for the rest of the band to play, that worked out really well for us.
15. These rehearsals I’ve been having for tour have been probably…they’re not probably…they’ve been the most difficult rehearsals I’ve ever been a part of. There’s a lot of remembering or triggering things on samples, or triggering different sound effects on sample boards, which I have never done before. The whole record – you’re gonna hear me say over and over again – every song and everything about it are things that I’ve never done before. And some may work amazingly and some may only work for a few people to dig. I know I got to do a lot of things that were very much dangerous territory for me, so to make something out of it was a cool challenge. I think that’s your job as an artist is to challenge yourself and not to take the easy way out. You have to really think what would be the wrong thing to do right now? What would be the wrong thing for me to do at this point in my life? What would be a very dangerous thing for me to attack and see if something good can come out of that. The beauty of musicians, especially nowadays, and recording is that if we don’t like it we don’t have to put it out. Back in Gene Vincent’s day and James Brown’s day they probably had to turn that in and put it out whether they liked it or not. And so now it’s nice to be able to experiment heavily like that, and say okay this is working and this other isn’t working so I’m just gonna abandon that one and move on.
16. There’s definitely songs in here that would be very challenging for someone who’s liked music of mine from before. Um, it’s funny because when you do do things that are strange people sort of get, “hey why did you, you know?” I’m sure when Led Zeppelin 3 came out everyone was like “how could you guys didn’t you recorded Whole Lotta love again for two, three, four more times?” you get that emotion from people at times. It’s almost like they’re saying to you “ didn’t you remember you could just write a kick ass riff? Instead of this folk song with poetry spoken over it, why wouldn’t you just write the riff?” as if I’d forgot… hahaha… it’s like what are you going to do? I have to go where the music tells me to go. The easy thing to do years ago would’ve been to just stay in The White Stripes this is working, people are liking this. Don’t start another band The Raconteurs, don’t start another band The Dead Weather, don’t start another project go solo. Just do what is working. But I can’t. That’s testament to me, that’s one of the things I’m most proud of, I don’t tell the music what to do, I listen to the music and let it tell me what to do. And the music is what’s really in control, I really like that, I like living by that.
17. Wasn’t it KLF who wrote ‘how to have a number 1 hit manifesto’? And you read that, and you think wow that’s actually pretty true, you repeat the chorus, you keep it at whatever, 120 beats per minute, and there’s these ideas that really do work. People have narrowed them down – whether it’s the speed of your own heart beat, whether it’s repetition when people are at work and they’re working on something they need to hear something repetitive. It astounds me that some times the things I’ve gotten away with. Say seven nation army for example, does not have a chorus, there’s no chorus in that song, by definition on paper that song should not be a hit in any context. And it somehow escaped that. One I’ve heard lately that doesn’t have a chorus is Uptown Funk that Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars thing, that doesn’t seem to have a chorus to me too. So those are interesting moments in music history to me. I’d love to compile a list one day of all the instrumentals that have made the Top 10 or even Number 1, like Telstar, and Peter Gunn, things like that and how hard that is – probably the last one was Crazy Frog or something like that in England I don’t know?

*[Interviewer: maybe the birdy song?]*

There’s this mix of novelty mixed with a song that is that good it doesn’t even need a vocal on it, it’s too good to stop it from becoming a hit. That’s interesting to me.

1. As a person who owns an independent record label – Third Man Records – that modern artists aren’t under that kind of gun. They got a lot of support, “hey take as much time as you want, don’t worry about it!” They probably should be getting, “no you have to finish this by the 15th and there better be a single on this or you’re dropped”. I mean that is probably why so many more people came out – so many brilliant people – did the things they did decades ago. And also their relationship to the blues. Modern society is slowly losing its relationship to the blues. And it’s tougher and tougher to bring that to people’s attention – there’s a lot of tropes, and a lot of strange whatever, traps that people think of the blues – that kind of jazz. That’s not really what I’m speaking of. It’s how the bands you love – The Beatles, the Led Zeppelins and all the bands that people love – their history is rooted in folk music and specifically blues music. That’s why when The White Stripes came around that sort of felt like it was part of my duty to be 21st century blues. What can… even seven nation army and songs like that were an attempt at what would a blues album sound like right now in 2001? A blues odyssey. So it’s part of your duty is that; But I think you have to figure that out for yourself now as an artist you have to be on your own case, you have to police yourself, no one is telling you what to do, you tell yourself to get in there and work under these constrictions and hurry up and figure it out and produce something that people can relate to.
2. It’s sort of song by song, track by track, there’s a need for me to sort of fulfil whatever that song ended up being. How can I make this into a story? Find a character that can tell this story? Some of them were just by accident. You know I was writing at the apartment and I went outside to write out in the yard and some guy walked by and said hello to me, and he had a poodle with a sweater on him. And that became this song ‘Why Walk A Dog?’ And starts to talk about, why in a way why do we enslave these other species on the planet? We make them do our bidding and make them into our court jesters in our homes, it’s pretty funny that we do this. Even people who are vegans, who don’t eat meat and don’t wear leather who still might have a pet. I’m not defending either way I’m just thinking about it out loud. I’ve had dogs and not had pets – I don’t have pets now. It made me think about that. It’s jumping into these barrels of what is this character thinking about and what are they trying to say? You see in the past maybe Lou Reed would say – he’d put in that someone else would say – Candy says or you know Cindy says or whatever the names of the other people are, they’re the ones talking, not me. And you learn from their characters, and that’s a great way to tell a story – is to take it away from yourself – because yourself is boring and that kind of Taylor Swift way of writing songs is kind of novelty for like a teenage generation, “oh this is her talking about her boyfriend she broke up with”. That’s all fine and good and everything, but when you’re a songwriter you want to aim for people thinking it’s not directly about you. When Frank Sinatra sings ‘Fly Me To The Moon’ – whoever wrote that song – I’m not literally thinking about Frank Sinatra flying to the moon.
3. Well Lillie Mae is on tour so that eliminated fiddle for me and I didn’t want to have the country instruments I used on these last tours with pedal steel and mandolin. There’s so much hip-hop rhythms and heavy synthesisers, so two of the synthesiser keyboard players from New York and LA are gonna play with us – Quincy and Neil. And then Carla Azar who’s played with me when I had the all-female band, she’s gonna play drums with me this year and then Dominic who I’ve been playing with since we were twelve years old is playing bass. And me, so it’s kind of a small band really for what we’re doing. It’s taking a lot of triggers and samples and things for everybody to figure out how to make these songs make sense with just five people. Because some of these songs sound like they have twelve people playing on them. So that’s what’s been so difficult at the rehearsals, but I really love what’s coming out of it. It’s going to be really interesting.