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A Visit to the Studio of Vincent Fenton

“THIS IS HOW MAGIC HAPPENS”

French Kiwi Juice was 13 when he taught himself the guitar, bass, piano and saxophone. Just because he was bored. Later, the Frenchman from Tours showed on YouTube how, as a multi-instrumentalist, he makes music. Shortly afterwards, the former bedroom producer was filling venues and festival grounds worldwide. We met Vincent Fenton, alias FKJ, for the first time in Paris, working in a friend's studio called OTPI. Then the pandemic happened: "I had actually just decided to take some time out, in a house in California, where I wanted to work on new material. I made it home just in time, two days before the world essentially shut its doors." Home - for French-born Fenton, this is on an island in the Western Pacific, in South Asia. We talk to him about the strange moments when ideas arrive, about his timeout during the last few months, and some of the best ways to learn an instrument.

“I did my training as a sound engineer back then because I felt like I was missing something. I wanted to control my sound better – the tone colors, the loudness, the mix, the “crispiness.” I just had no idea. Composing? That’d been easy for me to do since I was 13. But sound? Sound was a science. That’s why I decided to get practical training.”

◇ Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/fkj-2>

◇ Youtube: <http://smarturl.it/FKJSubscribe>

◇ www.frenchkiwi juice.com

Fenton points to the screen on his laptop, folders pop up. They contain music demos, layouts, sketches –everything he has ever thought of, noted down, or recorded – almost. Fenton smiles, “All the ideas that I’ve never quite finished. That’s a 10th of what is on the other hard drives.” This has been the case since his early youth in Tours, France: Composing comes easy to him. “It was playful to me to learn music. There were no goals or projections to become a musician or artist. I didn’t plan that. It was just a game to me. When I got home, I just played and played: piano, keyboards, sax, guitars, bass. I was obsessed with chords and compositions, it was, it is a constant drive.

Maybe that’s the best way to learn, when joy shows you the way. I couldn’t stop doing it.”

AND THEN CAME COVID-19

Fenton was a bedroom producer who put his music online on Soundcloud. “Nobody even knew I played an instrument.” He then showed on YouTube how, playfully, he puts his compositions together. That went well, and later extremely well. The last five years FKJ

toured stages on every continent. “I was ready for some time out. I had a plan, an idea for a new album, which I wanted to start working on at the house in California. Then the lockdowns happened. I only just made it back to our house here on the island. And then I was stuck, like I was stuck when I was a child. I began to make music when I was 13 because I was stuck at home. There was no real TV, no laptop to watch movies, no radio, no YouTube thing, you know.

So you kind of have to deal with boredom. And dealing with that, that’s how I picked up an instrument and fell in love with music. And I was able to spend a lot of time with my instruments, without any distractions. And so this lockdown felt, you know, this felt like I was finally back to my teenage years.” In actual fact, the plan for Fenton’s next album was to get away from the conformist, detached adult world with all of its unwritten rules – “and go back to this childishly innocent, naïve – in its best sense – state. And the lockdowns, they catapulted me back to those early days: there I am sitting with all these instruments and have all. The time. In the world. Wow.” Fenton grins: “Just the equipment and choice are somewhat better.”





He likes to do things by himself. He jumps from guitar to bass to saxophone to keyboard, puts together loop after loop, sings and samples live. When Vincent Fenton compiles and improvises his groove in a manner that is seemingly in passing, millions watch on YouTube, at festivals, and on sold-out tours. He is considered one of the most prominent representatives of the New French House in Paris. Funk, soul, and electro-jazz elements flow together in a sensual and offhand way. Whether Asia, Europe, North America, or Australia, “French Kiwi Juice” plays to sold-out venues and gathers thousands in front of his stage during the festival season. His improvisation, together with US trap house jazz musician Masego, has been viewed more than 310 million times on YouTube. A vinyl edition produced in collaboration with Tom Misch followed later on.

GAINING CONTROL OVER THE SOUND

Whilst composing was always easy for Fenton, technique previously remained a mystery. So precisely for this reason, Fenton trained as a sound engineer after he finished high school. “I was really passionate about music, but I felt as if I was missing something. I wasn’t able to develop my sound the way I wanted. I needed more control over it and my tone color. I had no idea when it came to such matters. Learning instruments and song structures was easy for me. I needed teachers to help me reach a certain level.” That’s why Fenton spent three years training as a sound engineer for movie and TV productions. “The turning points in terms of sound were the gurus I met during my internships. They were maestros who really changed the way I hear sound.”

THE FIRST GURU CAME FROM VIETNAM

The Frenchman met his first master of the craft on an internship in Vietnam. Fenton experienced a country that didn’t necessarily attach great importance to good sound in film and cinema. He was about to break off the

internship “because everything in that company was so cheesy and bad. Then they introduced me to this other guy.” Everything changed, because the young trainee found what he thought was likely the best sound engineer in Vietnam: Hoang Manh. He cared about sound in every detail, he knew every theory, every book, every plugin, every technique. “He is probably the biggest sound geek I know. He would always test and compare things and was eager to experiment. He was as passionate about sound as I was passionate about music. That’s what made him my first sound guru.”

Fenton found his second sound guru a year later in San Francisco at OTR, a studio where he worked for six weeks with Cookie Marenco, a sound engineer and producer who has been nominated for several Grammy Awards. “She works analog for as long as possible in the production chain. And she has ears that are out of this world. The way she listens, the way she spots things, and the way she communicates are extraordinary. She has a clear philosophy about music and the creative process, and sees it as something that you cannot control. She sees the studio as a sacred place. Your role as a sound engineer is to make the artist be creative. To put them

in a position where they can let out the best of their talents. She taught me a lot more about that than about technical things. Even if she knew a lot about technical details, this wasn't her priority. Although she knows how this compressor works, she doesn't care. For her it's all in the attitude, the mindset, and the feelings. That was really important for me. She was totally different but just as important for learning about sound. Whereas Vietnam was very technical and very geeky, Cookie was more an artist. These two different bodies of knowledge really helped me. And she is still my master teacher. One day I'll go there and record on tape, maybe an album."

"THE IDEA DOESN'T COME TO LIFE IN THE STUDIO. IT IS REFINED THERE."

To this day, the 30-year-old designs his setup according to the creative process. "I try to keep things as playful as possible. This is how magic happens: When you don't expect it, when you're playing and messing around. This can be anywhere – at home, on tour, while traveling. When the melody comes to you, you don't know why and you don't expect it. It might be a rhythm, a melody,

a chord. And most likely, you're not in a studio at that very moment. So usually, I just record it straightaway on my phone. I record or write as much as I can. Going into a studio is the second part: it's about elaborating it, re-recording every aspect, fine-tuning the color and the sound. These are two different things for me: In the studio, I'm working on the sound. But in my head at home or anytime, I'm making music. And if a melodic idea comes to me, and I have captured it with notes or little recordings – I try to get into a studio, and the sooner the better. Otherwise, the idea might fade away, the initial layouts might become cryptic, and you might lose the connection."

A SETUP FOR OUT AND ABOUT - SO THAT IDEAS DON'T GET LOST

On the other hand, Vincent Fenton was on the road almost every week at tours and festivals. There isn't always a studio available for elaborating his ideas. The solution? "When on the road, I have a very, very minimal setup in my suitcase. I have this small large-diaphragm condenser microphone always available, literally everywhere, and I





“I THINK THAT’S THE NUMBER-ONE RULE: THE CREATIVE PART OF THE PROCESS IS NOT WORK. IF YOU TREAT IT LIKE WORK, IT WILL LOSE ITS SOUL AND MAGIC IF IT’S NOT PLAYFUL – STOP IT, DO SOMETHING ELSE, START SOMETHING ELSE. THAT’S HOW MAGIC HAPPENS.”

record everything with it. I can plug it in at any hotel room. It’s a TLM... TLM 102 actually. I also always bring a little midi keyboard and a small audio interface. As for speakers, I use these small ones. They fit perfectly in my travel luggage and I love their sound. They are very, very small, very efficient, and very precise.” (As it turned out later, and we established this not without a certain amount of pride, he was speaking about the KH 80 DSP.) At home, I chiefly have instruments rather than sound gear. A couple of guitars, basses, saxs, synths, vintage keyboards... But it’s always evolving and I’m getting more and more sound gear these days.”

When going to professional studios, the Frenchman born in Tours still selects them not according to technology and equipment but depending on the interesting

instruments in their inventory. “While I love modern equipment because it’s so compact and powerful, I also love vintage instruments, especially keyboards and synths. They have a soul, a certain look, never sound the same – and their imperfection is a source of inspiration. Basically, I’m an analog person where I can be, especially in the studio. But since ideas don’t come according to a timetable, I try to capture them however I can, and then I’m a digital person.”

LIKE A CHILD AGAIN, OUT THERE ON THE ISLAND

Back in the studio on the island. Months have passed, and tours and gigs are still a long way off. Fenton is enjoying this and using the time for experiments, a healthy

sense of boredom and a spontaneous livestream of his album Ylang Ylang. Millions of people watch and listen how he improvises, plays and builds loops in a green oasis. Together with his wife, he streams freely improvised compositions for a festival in India and delights tens of thousands of people. He is working on his concept album, an interplay of childish freedom and adult experience. "There couldn't be a better time for this", he says from his hammock. "It's really about the nostalgia of the child's mind versus the adult mind. **I had time to learn new things again**, learn the piano again, learn the guitar again, learn the saxophone again. I even learned to play drums". He giggles: "I also learned how to tune my piano myself because I couldn't get anyone to come by. I got an amazing year because we were forced to stay still. It is a great way to leave the adult in you behind. As an adult, we are more conditioned to think and feel a certain way. We are less free in our minds, less free creatively. So that's what I was trying to do: to get lost while creating. Instead of putting things together a certain way "because it's better for the listener or the recording process or for a classical song structure". That's what I mean by innocence as a child. And later in the process, you need to find a balance between the child's vision and your knowledge as an adult person. It's really about the nostalgia of the child's mind versus the adult mind. My friends say it's a very calm album and they can hear my world. I like that."

"EXPANDING YOUR MUSICAL CULTURAL LANDSCAPE"

As a young musician, he wasn't aware of these nuances, says Fenton: "When I started, I wasn't even able to describe these things consciously, let alone perceive these tones and colors. It's really weird. When you're a kid and listen to music, you don't ask yourself these questions. You don't wonder how this recording sounds colder or warmer. You just listen to it. I would say: Expanding your musical culture is enough. You don't need to know everything about sound. But if you listen, listen, and listen again, you'll begin to detect those differences. 'Oh, those records have kind of the same color. Oh, and this is edgy. And this is low-fi, but cool. This has high brightness and this one is crisp and that one is dark...' Today I know exactly what I want and how to get it. This "how" is not always easy and can take a lot of time for experiments. It can be a long, long process. It's like you have new glasses – and suddenly you can see more details and more colors.

But it comes at a price. You lose a more naïve, innocent way of listening. Most people don't have these glasses. They feel your music unconsciously. This is by no way wrong or anything; it's the perfect way to experience music. Without the mind stepping in. I didn't ask myself these questions when I was a kid!"

"The more you listen to music, the more your musical culture expands, the more you understand what sound color you like; you even discover new colors. You can become more precise about what you are and what you love."

No, anyone who has ever experienced Vincent Fenton on stage or in the studio can't imagine him as someone who tinkers about with a sound for days on end. His art lies in the moment. Fenton nods in agreement: "The sound is one thing, but honestly, my main focus is always on the composition. That's what's most important to me. If there's a good melody, we don't care about the sound. A good song will always be a good song. You can play a song by Marvin Gaye on any instrument – it will always stay a good song if you play it properly. The musical idea is the important part. The work on the sound follows."

"I think what people like the most is to see the artist play every aspect of the music. Usually, songs are a collaboration of a producer, a singer, musicians, and recording engineers. I do every single aspect of it, every element from mixing to mastering. That's what people like, I'd say. And fortunately, it's something I also enjoy."

"I love a buttery type of vibe – optimistic music with a positive flavor. I know that I have a good song if I get a shiver down my spine, if I want to share it. As long as you feel something, you've reached your goal. Sound engineering comes after that."

