

Interview with Jared Bell (of Lymbyc Systym)

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Photo by Kevin Truong

Interview by Derrick Rossignol

Recently, we were able to get on the phone with Jared Bell, best known as half of the instrumental duo Lymbyc Systym along with his brother Mike. Their sound has been described as electronica-inspired instrumental rock and post-rock, which Bell claims is a “stupid word.” The Bell brothers were in different cities for much of the writing of *Symbolyst*, their latest album that’s set to hit stores on September 18, but as Bell told us in a lengthy conversation, the seemingly inconvenient process of sending song fragments back and forth via email has become their bread and butter.

Derrick Rossignol for 365 Albums a Year: When I first listened to the new album, my first thought was that it sounded happier or more optimistic than *Shutter Release*, your last one. Do you agree with that?

Jared Bell: Yeah, definitely. I think that’s a good way to put it. It’s more upbeat and I’d say overall, it’s more optimistic.

365AaY: Do you think there’s a reason for that, whether it was things that were happening in your life or a different approach to writing the songs?

JB: Yes, I think both. I’m definitely at a more comfortable place in my life. We never made angry music or anything before. It was more bittersweet or introspective. I move around a lot: we used to tour so much, but for this last record, we just kind of had more normal lives, so I had a more optimistic mindset with it. I think writing it, I sort of had the intention in the back of my mind that we were going to do vocals on it, so I wrote it from that perspective of possibly adding vocals and I sort of liked where it went without that, so we never did that. So I think that accounts partially for the more upbeat aspect of it, sort of having that vocal intention in the back of our minds.

365AaY: On the new album, there are a lot of new and different sounds, so what sort of new instrumentation did you introduce on this album and what impact did it have on the songwriting process and the sound of the end result?

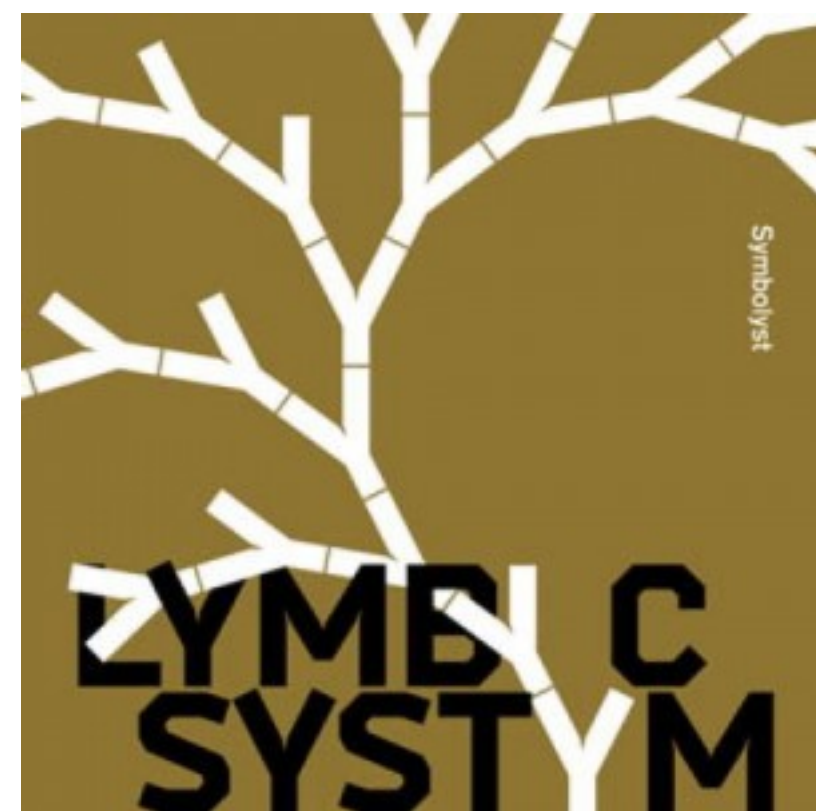
JB: There’s some new sounds, but we used a lot of the same stuff [we’ve been using] in different ways, and I’d almost say for the new sound, we almost stripped away some of the sounds of previous records. When it comes down to it, we end up using a ton of stuff. I couldn’t even make a list, especially when we get down to every sample. There are just so many sounds; I couldn’t tell you the source for all of them. We always record with vintage keyboards, piano, guitar and that kind of stuff. I’d say on this record specifically, a lot of demo stuff just stayed. There are the old Wurlitzer and Rhodes [keyboard] sounds... like 25% of it is like a fake

Wurlitzer and Rhodes sound I did in my living room for a demo and we just liked it, so it stayed. Half of it was recorded in my living room and put through guitar pedals and EQed to sound old.

As a band, I don't think our approach has ever been to get as many instruments in as we can because you can get so many different sounds out of one instrument. The melodic end is more my half and my brother Mike is more in the percussive and programming half. An electro keyboard is probably half the album, but the finished product gets run through so much stuff and we tried to experiment with one sound as much as possible. If anything, one of the biggest changes was that I used a clavinet keyboard and I'm not too familiar with that.

A lot of our previous two albums sound more guitar and distortion-heavy, and that's all from this one keyboard, so maybe that's the reason for the sort of "poppier" sound, because I didn't use that keyboard at all on this record. There's more of a cleaner and more confident sound, you might say.

365AaY: The album title [*Symbolist*] refers to a 19th century art movement that believes art should represent truth in more indirect terms, so what does that mean to you in terms of your music and the approach you took to this album?



JB: I don't know how familiar you are with the symbolist movement in general, but it wasn't even just music: it was poetry, literature, everything and it's sort of a vague term. It happened in different places, but one thing this movement had in common everywhere was an interest in the dream world or the world outside of everyday experience. On top of that, there are some aspects of it being super-religious or something like that. On the whole, I think it wasn't about having that Christian subtext or referencing a specific thing from literature, but more that you could personally interpret it in a way that would be applicable to you. That can sort of apply to everything, but especially instrumental music. The best instrumental music is when it makes sense to you. When we write, we're going to write things that makes sense to us, and there are stories behind it, but the goal for me isn't that somebody else knows my story, it's that it makes sense in the context of whatever the listener's doing whenever they're doing it, and that might change when the same person listens to it six months later.

I think we liked how Lymbyc Systym has this funny "Y" thing going on. It's always been this kind of annoying thing for us, like, "why did we pick this band name?" and people can't spell it right. For obvious reasons, we can't expect people to spell it right, but we may as well press that as far as we can and own it, so the cover is covered in Ys. You can't just sit and read the word as it is because there's something slightly off about it, so hopefully it gives you that pause to think about it and not just take it at face value.

365AaY: There are videos on YouTube from as far back as last summer, so about a year ago, of you guys playing songs from this album live. What made you guys decide to try the songs live instead of waiting until the album came out to start playing them during shows?

JB: There are a couple reasons. One was just a way to mix it up. We had been in the writing process, we were offered to do a tour and we had just been playing the same songs for so long.

Two albums before this, the *Love Your Abuser* record, we wrote that when me and my brother at the time lived in the same house and we sort of treated that record like summer camp or something. For one month, we would just start at 9 a.m. and go until 9 p.m. So for 30 or 40 days, we weren't always in the room at the same time because we've always written a bit separately, so he'd be in the room for an hour and then I'd been in the room for an hour and at the end of the day, we would jam for a few hours on an idea and morph it into something more compositionally sound.

The record after that, *Shutter Release*, it was sort of the opposite experience. We were living in separate places, and we wrote it almost entirely separately. I would write one part, email it to him and he would write another part, and we would just hand it off back and forth in that sort of fashion. We never really played those songs together. When we finally recorded it, we recorded it in the same room, in the studio. We spent a week or so doing it, practicing them and playing them. For the most part, I really liked that process. I don't know how well it would work for a band of three people or people who aren't brothers, but for the ways that we can be different from each other, like any family members or friends are, musically, we're really in sync. One in every 20 ideas we give to each other, we're like; "that sucks." We can change it and suggest things, but for whatever reason, maybe because we grew up listening to the same music and having the same influences, we're really in sync in that regard. We have a lot of trust, so writing that *Shutter Release* record, it was a good experience and I think we liked how it happened.



For this latest record, we wrote it basically the same way. This one was more like a day job in a positive way. We'd crank out songs, pass them back and forth. We really just went at it, like, "Let's make a record." I think one nice thing is that when we got to the studio to record it, it gave us a new perspective on the record. Although the core values of the song were the same before we recorded them, a lot of things evolved, like Mike's live drum parts changed significantly, and our whole studio perspective on it changed a lot. It was a really positive experience and I don't think I'll ever do another record not that way.

We'd practice the whole thing for several days and we'd play it [live] like 12 nights in a row. It was really nice because at that point, it wasn't like, "The record's out, this is what we're stuck with." It was still sort of a work in progress, and we took that opportunity to make some tweaks before the final recording.

365AaY: I've listened to all of your albums multiple times, and from that, I've realized you guys try a lot of different things thematically and musically. Despite that, I've seen you guys labeled as post-rock a lot and I know that a lot of bands who are called post-rock or have that word attached to them don't necessarily like it. How do you feel about that and what genre would you say your stuff falls in, or does it even fall into a genre at all?

JB: I think it's kind of a stupid word. If you're a band that's within a genre that you didn't create, it's like, what does it even mean? If you're not contributing something to the discussion musically, then it's probably not very good. There are a lot of amazing bands, and I don't claim to be one of them, like Tortoise and Mogwai, who are on different ends of the spectrum and they're lumped into the same genre. In that regard, I'd say, from a linguistic perspective, it doesn't really do its job right. If someone's like, "Oh, I'm a post-rock band," I have no idea what you meant, so in that regard, I guess I don't like it at all. I don't really know what the right word is.

Anything slightly more experimental is kind of lumped into one realm. So it should be slightly more specific, like instrumental punk music, instrumental hardcore music, instrumental metal, prog-rock or instrumental jazz or something, is more of a clarifying word than just calling it post-rock.

365AaY: So if I'm reading you right, I guess what you're saying, and what I sort of believe, too, is that post-rock is a word for people who don't really understand instrumental music that's different from a lot of stuff and just want to call it something?

JB: Yeah, in its most basic sense, definitely. It's just a blanket word that gets thrown around. Like, you could play psychedelic rock, but that could be a bunch of different things. Something like post-rock is meaningless. It could mean so many different things. It's kind of like a music head [thing]. Not that just anybody can't like it, but I feel like music lovers are more drawn to a song that doesn't just tell them what to think. I mean, I love a good love song or something like that, but it seems to be music lovers who listen to a variety of music who like more instrumental music.

365AaY: One weird thing I noticed when I was looking through your full-length albums is that each one has 10 tracks exactly. Is that just a coincidence or is there some thought behind that?

JB: I think it's just a coincidence. But on every record, there's just that one extra song that gets cut. It's just a good number and I feel like when we're working on a record, it always comes down to 11 or 12 songs, and I feel like if I can cut something... I feel like it's important to make at least one super bold decision for quality assurance. There might be some subconscious reason why it ends up at 10, but I don't know. I never thought about that.

365AaY: One last thing: On our site, we have posts every day that recommend albums to people that they maybe haven't heard or are just good albums that whoever is writing the article likes, so what album would you recommend?

JB: That's tough, because I'll get sucked into an album and play it all week and then next week, I'll get sucked into a different album that's something totally different. The latest thing I liked is... I don't even know the name of it... by Vetiver. I've always liked them in medium amounts, but for whatever reason, I don't know why, I just started listening to the... I know the album cover, with the sort of watercolor rainbow swoosh on a black cover. There's nothing about it that's like, "holy shit" and blowing me away... Well, I guess it is in a way because every song is really good. I can appreciate a band that writes folky rock songs and figures out really inventive hooks. That's just what I've been listening to now. I think the songwriting's really great. I'm not sure when it came out; I think it came out a few years ago. I really like the album art, too, and that's like 25% of a record to me. I'm really sad that's kind of going away because I feel like that's one of the most interesting parts of a record to me. Not that I begrudge the digital age or anything: I think it's awesome. It's just sad to see the album art go by the wayside. Oh, *The Errant Charm*, that's the record. I don't know if you've heard it.

365AaY: I don't think I have, no.

JB: Now you're going to put it on and go like, "yeah, this shit sucks." [laughs] But yeah, I've probably listened to the whole record like five times in the past week. But if you ask me next week, it'll probably be a different record. When I was doing a lot of the writing [for *Symbolist*], and this might account for the more happy aspect, I was listening to a lot of The Radio Dept. They're like an old standby. I listened to that and a mixture of... do you know Michael Andrews?

365AaY: I've heard the name, but I haven't actually heard anything from him, no.

JB: He's a film composer, like Jon Brion or something. He's like a younger Jon Brion. Well, I don't know the ages at all. But he's done a lot of stuff. He did [the score for] *Me and You and Everyone We Know* and one of the first things he did was *Donnie Darko*, and since then he's been an in-demand movie soundtrack person, so I can't even tell you what he's done at this point. He's probably done like 20 soundtracks or something. He actually has some solo records, but his soundtrack work is really great.

365AaY: Sorry for keeping you for so long, but thanks for taking the time to chat with me. Again, I just want to say I'm a huge fan and I really love the new album.

JB: Thank you, I appreciate it. Working on it the last three years, it's felt pretty different and I'm curious to see what people think of it.

365AaY: I love it, it's great stuff. Thanks again, I appreciate it.

JB: Yeah, take care. Have a good night.

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As mentioned earlier, their new album titled Symbolist comes out on September 18. For more information you can visit their website.

Read more: <http://365aay.com/interview-with-lymbyc-systym/#ixzz2B1ejJi50>