



*Gabriel Judet-Weinshel, Max Gabriel to those who know him through his music, works across genres. He explores the disciplines of music and film buoyed by tides of language—now a linear narrative on the move, now a collage of moments, captured fragments, discrete images.*

*“And so I finally come to rest  
Hills of red clay and sun-baked grass  
Memory clear since the beginning  
Up the path I’ll find her sleeping  
I was a lonely hunter  
for the ones that scatter  
But we all need shelter in the end.”*

*He gives us media textured by the treasures of constant observation: his songs read like poems and his films feel like the work of a painter, dreamlike at times, beautiful often.*

*“After cigarettes and rain  
And a little bit of disdain  
You just fade away  
With the burgundy  
I had a dream that I was flying  
Flying in the air like Joshua  
That’s my new dream  
I like how dreams shift like Mercury”*

*In this work we hear an approximation of the waking city, a circus clown performing at dusk, rain on the windows—all of this laid over language that gently dissolves until the particular, the ordinary, the most difficult desires are transformed into art—that crucial, communicative creation.*

— Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

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*Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to facilitate readability.*

Carlin M. Wragg: I thought we could start by thinking about what kind of work and communication lyrics do in a song—how do you think of language and music working together to communicate a story or a sentiment?

Gabriel Judet-Weinshel: I think Leonard Cohen had been interviewed, and Leonard Cohen, as you know, started out as a writer, and was first known as a writer and a poet. After he’d really established himself as a songwriter he was interviewed about the difference between a poem and a song and he said “I can’t quite tell you the difference but I know there is one.”

I think it comes down to the idea that you can get away with things in a song that you can’t get away with as much in a poem, where all you have are the words, and the silence between words. I think a good poet works with those silences.

In a song, on the other hand, you have all these other elements: you have rhythm, and then you have melody, and then you have the chordal harmony, and then you have all the aspects of the production, which are incredibly powerful tools, and sometimes I think if you have language that’s too ornate or too poetic, meaning too dense, like you would on a page, it can overwhelm the

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listener. You can have a line like “I love you baby” over and over again five times, which would just not work in a poetic setting but works perfectly in a song because there’re all these other things to augment that line, and to comment on it.

CMW: As you say that though the lyrics that you compose and use are not always as simple as “I love you baby.” There are some excellent metaphors and there are amazing images; one I’m thinking of right now as we’re talking is “I’m so in the ink of you”...

GJW: I stole that from Anne Sexton — I think there’s a line from an Anne Sexton poem where she says “I’m deep in the ink of you” and it always... I read it when I was seventeen, sort of in the midst of the first time I fell in love... actually, the person I was in love with sent me that poem—they’re very tortured poems to send to somebody during a love affair - but I remember that line and it always stuck with me.

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CMW: Well that’s really natural, I think. The more I talk with people who are working with language the more I realize that there are these amazing images that they’ve seen at other places in their lives which become part of the work and grow into something new. So Anne Sexton is one of the poets you cite, and I know that a short film of yours was inspired by another poet, is that right? I’m thinking of...

GJW: Wild!

CMW: Wild!

GJW: That was from a Mary Oliver poem I always loved, I just took certain lines out. In the film there are images of those lines written in chalk on the concrete.

CMW: This is a film that uses a poem very directly, and is a little explicit about citing language, and yet the film itself doesn’t have much, if any, dialog in it. It’s a composition of images: there’s a woman and she’s in different settings and there are some moments she’s in the sea and at other moments she’s twirling about with an umbrella over her head, and there’s a lot of spontaneity and joy, and I’m interested in how being inspired by something that is based in language can move out and be purely image, then rely again on language, because I think there’s a moment, you were saying, where you see the language, you said in chalk, right?

GJW: Yes.

CMW: So I’m just wondering how that works, and how your mind works when you’re thinking about a starting point, then moving that, again, into the realm of images.

GJW: Well, I think one of the things that is both a strength and a weakness of mine is how much I love language. There was a period in my life where I really wanted

to be a poet; language was so important to me, and continues to be. At the same time, when I work with film, language often

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disappears—I often don’t use language, I don’t rely on it and I try to rely more specifically on images. The images that come to me, that most naturally come to me, arrive without language. Writing dialog, for instance, is not one of my strong points, it’s still something that I struggle with, and when it does come out it feels a bit clunky, or forced. So somehow reading this poem, and using specific lines that someone else had written, that I hadn’t written, felt very natural, to work with both my strengths and weaknesses in regards to language.

CMW: When you say certain images were naturally evoked, do you think that you were literally reading the words on the page and then those were the images that presented themselves naturally, or were you reinterpreting a meaning behind the words and then putting whatever it was that came to mind into action?

GJW: I think it was more the latter. I think it was a less literal process and more an emotional reaction that then sparked an image. I do a lot of music videos for bands, and I try when I write the treatments for those videos, to allow the song, both words and music and all, to evoke certain images, but not to take the literal meaning of the words and translate them into a literal image. Because that, especially in a music video setting, can almost be hokey. If there's some line about running through green grass and then you actually see a character in the video running through green grass it isn't as effective as a less direct and more emotional response to that line.

CMW: How do you do that when you're putting together the music video? Perhaps it would be easier and tempting to have somebody standing there in front of a microphone singing and then flash to, again, somebody running through grass. How do you keep it dynamic and different?

GJW: Well, I think you can take the same liberties you can take in terms of lyric writing in a song... You can get away with things, you can get away with a cheesy lyric, or you can get away with a lyric that doesn't necessarily connect literally.

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narrative way because the song, the melody, the structure of the music has a kind of narrative.

You can also get away with that in a music video to a song and therefore it's a place where you can get away with being more experimental. If you're doing a narrative film it has to hold together in terms of a story, but with a music video the song is already the story so the images become just a compliment to that. When I'm writing the treatment I'll just play the song and usually trust whatever images come to me initially, and try to be almost in a dream state when they're coming to me. I think this happens to anyone, if you just sit down and listen to a song images will naturally come to you, and those are usually the right ones, in a way. If you try to have too literal an interpretation it's usually less effective.



CMW: That makes me think of your song "The Exile of Saint Christopher," which is the name of your album as well. Listening to this song I felt that there was a sort of narrative buried in the repeating lines, although it wasn't—you weren't moving straight through time, you weren't going from point A to point B. And I wonder if you could talk about, if there was a narrative, what you thought the originating idea to be and how you translate that into, again, something that's not based in linear time?

GJW: Yeah, I think that song... I think I let myself not completely make sense because it was coming very fully. I think a lot of my early songs, stuff that I would never share with anyone, they were all sort of idea-book fragments, meaning I always carry an idea-book with me, just lines, stray lines, images. And often with the early songs I would just toss all those lines together and call it a song, and somehow it would never quite work, it would never hold together, and you would sense, in listening to it, that there were a lot of different ideas, maybe some good ideas, some bad, but they never made sense as a whole.

So for a while, as a discipline, I would try... I always had a friend who would tell me "try to write songs about just one thing, make it a discipline for you." And so I did that for a long time, and

having felt a little more of a sense of mastery of that “The Exile of Saint Christopher” was a way of letting myself, giving myself a little bit of liberty in writing a song that didn’t have as much of a narrative.

I think the chorus is about an old girlfriend, “dreams of you on a rainy day, skin on skin and the bone part way,” that was an early love affair that didn’t work. I think when I was writing the song I was, at the time, single and it really was a rainy day and it was one of those moments where this person comes back in your mind in a very powerful way. So that chorus was very much just about her. But then there’s the pre-chorus, “Michael says I’m dying, they take an x-ray,” that whole section, that’s about my friend Mike — Mike Wei, and I remember we were driving and he had a cough that wouldn’t go away and he had had an x-ray and it was one of those conversations where you realize, like the line in the song, that you’re not as young or as invincible as you used to feel.

CMW: Michael means “who is like God,” and St. Christopher is the patron saint of travelers, and you have Joshua in another song, so I was wondering if you were trying to make a nod toward these names and perhaps some meaning there?

GJW: Oh God, I wish I were that smart, it’s completely accidental, I didn’t think about that. Some of these names, it’s more about how they sound in the mouth, and they came to me, Eleanor, Michael, Joshua, all those names just kind of came unbidden. I’m really glad that they have some meaning, but...

CMW: Yeah, what do you think the act of naming an individual in the song does instead of saying “you” or “she,” for example?

GJW: I think it’s just the exercise of trying to be specific. I’ve found that being more specific in terms of language usually paints a more vivid picture. And also, there are so many times where I address people in the songs that I think it was good to just try to separate characters out, if it were always “you” then you would never know.

CMW: Now, why “Max Gabriel?”

GJW: Ah! Gabriel Judet-Weinshel was a problematic rock star name, and when we were trying to solve that problem I thought of Max from Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and I always, as a kid, wanted to be called Max—it sounded sort of tough, and cool. So now I’m stuck with

*Gabriel Judet-Weinshel was a problematic rock star name...*

Max Gabriel, which sometimes seems a little silly and, who knows, in the future I might think of yet another name. I’m creating, one of my side projects is making a fake EPK called *Who is Max Gabriel?* which is a series of apocryphal interviews with people talking about the myth of Max Gabriel and his various adventures in the world and how he used to be Dylan’s gardener and whatnot.



CMW: “In Wake Up Eleanor,” which is one of the songs and Eleanor is the character in it, you talk about fame, in a way. There’s this Eleanor figure who you’re beckoning forth to come into her own, and the line is “you’re finally famous.” The beginning of the album also starts with a little bit about your friends and they’re going towards this fame but they’re not there yet. So I wondered about that movement from perhaps the origins of creativity and the individual space to being in the public sphere and what you think about that, and what that gives an opportunity to do?



[Music clip: “Your Favorites Songs”]

GJW: Well a lot of the songs on the record were conceived at a point when I was struggling so much, just financially as an artist, just trying to stay afloat in New York, and I think “Wake Up Eleanor” — there’s just a lot of anger in the song. I think when we were producing it there was a moment in the production when I was working - Scott Healy produced the record - and on an early version I think I was worried that some of the anger got lost, and it was only in feeling like it had been lost that I realized that the song, what really guides the song, is a kind of anger.

I wrote it just at a time where I could barely get enough work as a filmmaker, much less as a musician, to pay the bills, and I just felt this sense of frustration that I couldn't get my work out and I couldn't also have enough time because I was always trying to make money to do the work that I cared about.

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Meanwhile, I think it was kind of an amalgamation of different characters in my life, people who had either found fame very easily, or people who were seeking fame and as a result of that seeking, had kind of given up their values, kind of sold out.

I was also, I think, recognizing in myself that desire for fame and kind of being critical of it. A lot of the anger in that song is being directed at myself. It's like, if I was so miserable, why did it matter so much to be either famous or successful? So the questioning created an anger too.

CMW: The project that you're working on now, which you were telling me about earlier, is with subway musicians, and I'm curious about how we can translate that talk about fame into this space where they are going down into the subway every day and working on their art in a public sphere, and yet perhaps not getting what we would think of as the attention that they might like. Having worked with them, have you found that perception to be the case? What do they think about what they're doing and where they'd ultimately like to end up?

GJW: What I keep finding, which I'm so struck by, with a lot of the people we've been interviewing, is that they're not, some of them are, but they're - a lot of them are very happy. They're a lot happier than you would imagine, because their lives are pretty hard. I used to street perform, a little bit as a musician, but also as a juggler, I busked on the street, for a while that was my main source of

income, and it's hard. So I was surprised, looking at these people and meeting them, that a lot of them are very happy, and I think genuinely, and probably sometimes happier than, say, a Wall Street banker or a lawyer or somebody in a more socially acceptable job, a job that pays more and gains more respect from the mainstream world.

CMW: Where do you think that happiness that you're describing comes from? Have they spoken to that at all?

GJW: Well I think that goes back to the idea of fame. Not very many of them say, "I want to be famous." More of them say, "I just want to be able to keep doing my music and sharing it with people and to be able to support myself." Which is just really a wonderful thing. I think there's maybe something about the process of playing there and connecting with people every day that grounds them. I'm trying, I'm hoping, that we can keep the show at that level, that we're really seeing these people for who they are, and we're not trying to make their lives more or less slick, and really using the idea, the word "reality" TV in the way that I think it should be, which is that we're showing something real.

CMW: Have they told you a bit about how they may have come to be subway musicians and chosen that as a path to performing their art?

GJW: Yeah I think a lot of them... It's such an eclectic group. There are folks out there who really are literally homeless, there's a guy who, if he makes enough money, he gets a hotel room, if he doesn't he just sleeps on the train and keeps playing, to this guy, William Ruiz, that we interviewed today, who lives comfortably. So I think people came to it through a lot of different means. I think the fact is the music industry is completely in flux and sort of in free-fall and it's very hard to make it as a musician, no matter how gifted you are, or how connected, and a lot of very established musicians are starting to play in the subways.

William Ruiz was talking about jazz guys that he plays with who sometimes go down there because

you can actually make decent money, and sometimes better money, then trying to tour the country or sell CDs.

CMW: Can you talk a little bit about that from the songwriter/musician perspective? Given that you've had a new album and done the performing and the touring. How have you found that from the other side?

GJW: I got this small record deal a couple of years ago, and when that happened there was this idea that that's it, I've made it, I'm going to be a rock star now. I think the last two years have been an education in how difficult it is, and how the music industry just wasn't what it used to be. There really isn't this idea of instant gratification, instant arrival. It's very very hard to do, it's very hard to just make a living as a musician, much less become famous as one. So I think I've sort of just realigned my, or slowing am realigning, my values around that, and trying to go back to the work and trying to go back to the process of songwriting and letting that be rewarding in itself.

The other thing is, because I'm doing film, and because my film career is more developed in a lot of ways, there's only so much time I have. You know, if I were just doing music I would have more time to devote to touring and really pounding the pavement and doing all the promotional things one needs to do to make it as a musician. As a result I think right now I've put the promotional work one must do on the back burner and I'm focusing more just on songwriting and keeping that part of me alive.

CMW: So, speaking of film, what kind of work are you doing apart from the subway musician series?

GJW: Yeah, the subway series, strangely, it's almost a day job, and it's a great day job, but the real labor of love I have happening with film right now is a feature I'm developing with a set of producers who produced a short film of mine in 2007 called *The Heart is a Hidden Camera*. We made that film together as a spec project, both to send to festivals but also to use as a calling card in order to get a feature made, and that's where

we are now. I have a treatment that I'm going to be turning into a feature script with the hopes of beginning preproduction in the fall or early 2009.

CMW: What's the story of that film?

GJW: Wow, I can only speak a little about it because it's so inchoate. It's actually unexpectedly a kind of a murder mystery, but it has a geopolitical element. There's a lot in it about questioning one's position in the so-called "first world" and how one's lifestyle or actions might affect people in other parts of the world. So the film begins as a thriller and hopefully narratively holds you and is interesting just on that level, just as a whodunit, as a murder mystery, but then there are all these other political elements that slowly insinuate themselves into the movie.

CMW: We're sitting in the office of one of your mentors in the film industry, is that right?

GJW: Yeah, we're sitting at Mad River Post, and specifically in the office of a very talented editor named Mike Elliot, who is the owner of Mad River Post. Mad River is a spot house, meaning it's an off-line editing house for ads, for commercials. I met Mike when I was twenty-four. I was just getting out of school, looking for a job, and my resume found its way to Mike through a family friend. Mike was looking to do a kind of labor of love, on subway musicians actually, strangely, sort of funny how things repeat themselves... and I ended up shooting in the subway for about six weeks for Mike, kind of a spec project on subway musicians, and that led to a lot of other jobs with him. First doing these short films, these kind of branding pieces for the company that were used on his website and on different reels.

Mike recently got me a really wonderful job camera operating for a guy named Andrew Douglas, who's a pretty established ad director, and that was someone I've always wanted to work with, so that was really quite a treat.

CMW: The short films and the promo spots that you mentioned, they incorporate animation, don't they, and some of your short films do as well?

GJW: Well my mother's a painter and I, at different times, have painted a lot and I think a lot of those films try to tap that part of me. There's a lot of very handmade collage-like work. You know, I think of film a lot as a collage. In the old days when you were working on a Steinbeck to edit instead of a computer, you were literally cutting up pieces of celluloid and sticking them back together again. I got to do that in college, just at the end of when anyone ever uses a Steinbeck, and it made me really realize how much film is like collage—it's pieces of things. So these animations just feel like that, they feel like bits and pieces, fragments, and very connected to painting, and to collage.

CMW: In the feature that you were talking about, do think this textural element will come in, or are you approaching it from a more straightforward visual sense?

GJW: No, it definitely will, but in a very specific place. The main character in the film is actually an advertising executive at a creative agency, and the film plays with the idea of advertising. Obviously different parts of my career have flirted with the ad world, and I think I have a tremendous ambivalence about that world, both an attraction to it and a repulsion. So for the character in the film, occupying that world, the collage element comes in when we see his dreams, and his dreams, in stark comparison to the rest of the visual style of the film, are very collage-like and very fragmented, whereas the rest of the film, or at least aspects of the film, are very slick, kind of mirroring the language of advertising.

Again, something I'm struggling with is to try to get a script that, despite all these images, and my

penchant for making really visually rich and surreal films, also tells a straightforward story that anyone can connect to. I think artists need to remember their viewer. I think it's very easy to just

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make images that are very, almost, solipsistic, that are just insular and relate to your own internal vocabulary and maybe don't communicate. So I think that's something I struggle with, is trying to remember that I should be speaking to an audience. Maybe it's because I'm an only child and I forget that there's an outside world. [LAUGHTER]

CMW: Who are some of the directors you may draw upon as you move into creating this feature?

GJW: Let's see... I love Michael Haneke. I haven't seen a lot of his work but what I've seen I love. I'm completely in love with Julian Schnabel. When I saw *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* I was really jealous, I really wanted to have made that film. Wong Kar-Wai, visually I love, I don't always feel I'm as taken by his narratives, and I think maybe that's Chris Doyle, his DP, that I really admire.

What's funny is often the films that I enjoy watching aren't as close in sensibility to the kind of films I want to make. I have a joke that I really love French coming of age films that are character based. Someone like the Dardenne brothers. Those are films that aren't really about the visuals, they're much more about the characters, but they're not the kind of films I would make. The kind of films I would make are like Tarkovsky's or Wong Kar-Wai's or people who rely almost completely on the visual. So I guess that's the unifying factor. Julian Schnabel, being a painter, is such a visual filmmaker and I think that's probably what drives his films more than characters.

If you think of somebody like Noah Baumbach, his films are all about these amazingly three-dimensional characters, and although he's visual, I think that's rather secondary to the dialog and the plot and the characters.

CMW: If you were a member of an audience who was going into a film and you'd been used to things that are more heavily narrative, more realistic in look and feel, more like the camera is the eye that you would have and you're watching somebody else's world. If you move from that into a world that's like Wong Kar-Wai, that may feel very different and very strange—

GJW: As a viewer?

CMW: As a viewer. How would you start accessing it, and maybe learning to love it?

GJW: I think there would have to be something that enchanted them, that made them want to move into that world.

Some people just might not like it. I think some people love films like that, who would sit and watch Buñuel-like films or,

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again, Tarkovsky-like films, and even if they didn't understand all of it, just love it for the visuals. And there're some people who are like, "I can't stand this stuff, this is too weird."

I guess any time somebody's taste expands I think it's because something touches them in that new thing that they're drawn to, something that's accessible immediately. If there's nothing accessible immediately I don't think you can gravitate towards something, but if there's something immediately accessible or something that touches you, then that creates the spark that makes you want to stretch.

CMW: One of the things that we haven't talked about in film but is a really strong element is the soundtrack, the music or the sound effects, or the atmosphere that's created by listening to the films. What do you think about when you're putting this together? Especially in the short films that don't rely on dialog.

GJW: Well there, I think, is where my life as a musician and my life as a filmmaker intersect. Since I was very young I would always listen to music and see images, and very often the germ of a film, the first seeds of a film, came from listening to a particular song or particular piece of music. So very often it's the music that comes first. I think music more than any other medium inspires my films. More than a book or a painting

or something... actually paintings often inspire films as well. So I think in terms of picking the music for a film, sometimes the music's already chosen.

Or at least the feel that I'm after is already chosen because it came before the film. But I think I'm still very curious about and still investigating the intersection of music and image, and I think that more than any other two mediums film and music are alike. They both are very visceral and both arrive at the viewer at a place that's almost before language, it's pre-language, and therefore unconscious, and deep, and primal. I think being able to harness both of those at the same time is something I'll probably spend my whole life doing.

CMW: Well, Max Gabriel, Gabe, thank you very much.

GJW: Thank you, Carlin, it's been a pleasure.

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*Gabriel Judet-Weinshel's music videos, documentaries, and short films have appeared on television and in film festivals around the world.*

*Producing music under the name Max Gabriel, his work is characterized by startling lyrics, an unconventional voice, and often cinematic textures.*

*His debut album, "The Exile of Saint Christopher," was released by sonaBLAST! Records in 2007.*

*To download the podcast of this interview and to read additional information about Mr. Judet-Weinshel, go to [www.openlooppress.org](http://www.openlooppress.org)*