J. Robbins has been the guitarist/singer and primary songwriter (or pushiest collaborator) in several bands since the early ’90s, including Jawbox, Burning Airlines, Channels, and Office of Future Plans. For the bulk of that time, he has also been active as a recording engineer/producer, working with musicians from around the world at his Baltimore-based studio, The Magpie Cage.

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*Basilisk* is my second solo record. I’ve been writing and co-writing songs in bands since I was 19, but for a long time the band was always the point, more than anything I personally was trying to express - though there was a lot in there that was always trying to come out. In 2010, Chad Clark invited me to play my first solo show as part of the “Story/Stereo” live series he was curating. That experience focused me on the fact that I had been writing songs for most of my life, and that pursuit was feeling more urgent with time, not less. After this I chose to start writing in a way that was more personal and more portable, where songs would be more adaptable to different formats and not so dependent on the dynamic of a particular band to make their point. Which is to say, *Basilisk* (and my first record, Un-Becoming) are not anomalies or side projects, they represent the main current of my creative efforts.

My first record, Un-Becoming, came together very slowly over a few years. I’m proud of it and I’m happy at how immediate it feels, but the reality of putting it together was often laborious, full of second-guessing and doubt, and more than a few times I got lost in the process. I swore that whatever I did next, if I could swing it, would be much more in the moment and recorded almost entirely live if possible. I didn’t even want to double the guitars if I could get away with it. A lot of my core musical inspirations remained: Killing Joke, Sugar, Britpop and shoegaze bands, Gang of Four - but I was also listening to a lot of early Sparks, and to Frank Black’s live-to-2-track records. I wanted to go back to the feeling I had when Jawbox recorded “Novelty” - songs that came out of me as directly as possible, and a recording that captured a moment, with little or no looking back or overworking.

Anyway, that was my thinking at the end of 2019.

2020 gave us the pandemic, which despite all its awfulness also gave me a lot of opportunities to write and demo music - but everyone was terrified to get into the same room together to play. Finally, around February of 2021, I called up Brooks Harlan and drummer/dear friend and long-time collaborator Darren Zentek and asked, if we all tested negative for a couple of days in a row, remained masked, etc, would they be down to meet me at the studio and do a 2-day session where we work up the songs on the spot, hit record, and see how it turns out. Brooks and Darren were into the idea - we were all in full cabin fever mode at that point and dying to do anything - so I sent them the demos and we did it. The musical connection had always already been there, but the energy that came from all being in the same room doing this together - something we had just spent a year wondering if we’d ever get to do again - was wonderful. It felt like having been lost in the desert, and then finding an oasis. I’ve never been so happy with a session - both the results and the experience, and the outcome was exactly what I had wanted: something more stripped down and very immediate.

We were all fired up and we did a second session in March 2022. In the interim I worked on vocals and overdubs at home. The lyrics were (as always) somewhat therapeutical: “Automaticity” came out of thoughts on aging and remaining present in a world increasingly going on auto-pilot; “Last War” and “Dead Eyed God” work out fears prompted by January 6th and the rise of neo-fascism. More personal matters were trying to work themselves out as well. Recurring childhood dreams (Deception Island), Surrealist games (Exquisite Corpse), and trephination guru Amanda Feilding (Open Mind) were also in the mix.

Another result of pandemic isolation was that I had also been working on more abstract, electronic based music (inspired by my love of film soundtracks, Peter Gabriel’s music, and by studio work I had done not long ago with the band Locrian), using granular synthesis, sampling, and software synths. So as *Basilisk* come together, I wanted to see if I could pull those sounds into the flow of the record, open up its vocabulary a little and still make something cohesive.

Connection has always been the whole point of music making for me. There are so many ways to come at it, and I don’t want to close any of those doors. Going forward, I only want to open more of them.