

Man Man
Carrot On Strings
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When Man Man released its last album, “Dream Hunting in the Valley of the In Between,” frontman Honus Honus (né Ryan Kattner) was in a state of unrest, oscillating between hope and cynicism. Perhaps fittingly, the album ended up dropping during the pandemic. (We could all relate.) But much like that bizarre turn of global events, the ennui seems so distant now to Man Man’s creative force, whose revived sense of purpose washes through Carrot on Strings (out June 07, Sub Pop), his latest release, which radiates a mix of calm and confidence.

Kattner always embodied a wild-man pied-piper vibe: his melodic, art-rock output just unhinged enough that it was at once intriguing and angsty. He was so alluringly creative that you went along with it, even if you were never sure where Man Man would take you. Carrot on Strings is no less inventive, but its ethos is radical in context of the band’s two-decade, idiosyncratic career.

The name “Carrot on Strings” came to Kattner while experimenting with the sound of someone munching on the vegetable, which you can hear in the cacophonous, almost similarly named title track. It refers to “the diagnosis of my career,” or how success always seemed to dangle uncertainly before him—life as a series of “almost maybe” opportunities to elevate things to a more sustainable tier. But listen intently, and you’ll hear a more content Kattner, making an uneasy peace with, “Life, as far as I’ve known it, has always been side hustles. Would it be great if I could go into a studio and record for a year without figuring out how to finance it? Yeah, it would be,” he says. “But ultimately, I need to keep making music because art is an extension of my psyche. It’s not about how I define myself or want to be perceived necessarily. It’s how I have learned to translate the palpitations of my heart.”

The unrest may have slightly lifted (chalk that up to fatherhood), but “Carrot on Strings” opener, the shot of scintillating adrenaline that is “Iguana,” clarifies that he’s still on a mission to traverse uncharted territory, even if it is total banger

sing-along. The song melds Krautrock, dance music, no-wave, and even an homage to Old Yeller (the 1950s Disney film) sneaks in for good measure. Kattner, who penned the lyrics to "Iguana" while cycling through the hills of Los Angeles, was inspired by director Werner Herzog's somewhat mystical cave-painting documentary, Cave of Forgotten Dreams. "In the last 10 minutes of it, he has this beautiful monologue about uncertainty and the universe, the evolution of self-consciousness, albino crocodiles. How nothing is real, nothing is certain. Here you have this relatively straightforward documentary about ancient cave paintings, and in the end, Herzog can't escape himself from being himself, which in the end, why would you want to escape yourself anyway" he recalls, drawn to this outsider artist who infiltrated mainstream culture without compromising his impulses. With "Iguana," Honus Honus continues, "I'm trying to write a very genre-specific song, but I can't escape my own idiosyncratic pull into making it be something else or a combination of something else."

Growing up with a father in the U.S. Air Force, Kattner lived an itinerant childhood that included a few pivotal years in Germany, where he honed in on an appreciation for out there German cinema and art. He'd go on to teach himself to play piano at age 22 by playing with drummers, developing a style more rhythm-based than chops heavy but was also equally focused on screenwriting, the craft he studied in art school along with playwriting. (He continues to more-than-dabble in the film industry with an acting role in the upcoming horror-comedy movie Destroy All Neighbors, for which he also served as composer; music supervising season 1 & 2 of the Interview With The Vampire AMC TV series; and shopping around, with director Matthew Goodhue, a script he wrote that he describes as a Wim Wenders road movie on acid.) "As a child I gravitated towards troublemakers but not necessarily out of rebellion but more likely because it simply seemed more interesting at the time," yet, growing up as a multiracial Hapa kid (half Filipino, half white), "I didn't have anyone else to relate to on that level until I discovered playing music in my early 20s. The artworld and especially underground music is scattered with people from all sorts of disparate backgrounds."

Like "Iguana," the spacious, indie-pop "Odyssey" is a slight nod to another of his German avant heroes, the filmmaker Rainer Fassbinder (also the musician's professed style icon). "My melodies are typically born out of playing parts on

repeat,” he explains, “and pushing the boundaries of where my voice can go. Music and lyrics are birthed together, laborious but significant in that it instills a combined permeance. One fits into the other like a puzzle ring.” Meanwhile, “Bloodungeon” — a symbolic sexy, mutinous lovechild between Italo-disco legends La Bionda and the goth-rocker the Sisters of Mercy (or as Kattner puts it, “Dario Argento’s Goblin mixed with something from a ’90s leather bar”) — even finds him crooning suavely in German at one point. Sensing a theme yet?

All these journeys off the beaten path are underscored by a palpable ease that’s way less about the process and more about the outcome. “It’s never been a driving factor in my life as a performing artist but I’m just at a point now where I don’t give a fuck about image or any of that stuff,” he says. “And it’s not about acquiescing. Making music, acting in people’s films, these things are more fun these days, come more naturally. That doesn’t mean it’s easier by any means. There’s still love, labor, and toil involved. And a reserved spot on the wall for banging my head in frustration.” This newfound looseness is imminently apparent on songs such as the twangy “Cherry Cowboy,” a lingering, ambling ode to small-town Texas (where he was born), loosely inspired by a Randy Newman ear worm from the 1986 comedy *Three Amigos* and “Pack Your Bags,” a thumping stadium chant just waiting to be unleashed for consumption.

In a bid to not overthink anything (mindful that his last album took about seven agonizing years to make), he booked out five days in Mant Sounds studio in Glassell Park, Los Angeles and enlisted “very chill” producer Matt Schuessler, with whom he had worked on a cover of Neu!’s “Super” for the seminal Krautrock band’s box set. He and the band knocked out the songs live, workshopped in front of live audiences while Man Man toured, in 5 days and then hashed out other sonic ideas over the coming months. “I wanted things to be loose. My intention was just to knock it all out,” he says. He even recorded more than a few of the single-track vocals while reclining on a couch. “It’s pretty wild,” he says — “because, you know, it wasn’t actually wild at all. It was the first time I wasn’t sequestered in an isolation booth, extensive baffling keeping me apart from the rest of the music. Something about being in the mixing room, tracking vocals, songs blasting out of the monitors that just felt perfect for this particular album.”

“Odyssey” considers Kattner’s transformation, his newly defined sense of self that distinguishes his outsize stage persona from the thoughtful, soulful guy he actually is. Before surmounting this identity crisis, he frequently faced bouts of severe depression and imposter syndrome. “I first got into music to escape from myself,” he says. “And now, it sounds so corny, but I have zero doubt that music ended up saving my life.”

So when you hear him croon on tracks such as the wistful meditation on humility “Mulholland Drive” or the cheeky-tableau “Cryptoad”, you’re actually hearing Kattner liberate himself. “Take me home,” he sings on the latter. “This party sucks.” It’s his favorite song on the album. “I didn’t want to make an overtly heavy record. The world already has too much heaviness,” he explains. “We’re teetering on the brink of fascism, the planet is boiling, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria. We don’t need to have another album that points that out with every breath.”

“On a cellular level, I’m not even the same person I was on my last album. This time around, I didn’t want to overthink it, or beat myself up too much about it,” he continues. “I think I spent the first 15 years of playing music, wanting to quit every day. And now...it just feels like a gift.”