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King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard's Creative Throughput: Why Popularity Isn't Desirable

## **I. Obscurity and Creative Freedom**

Obscurity is directly correlated with creative freedom. Intuitively, this makes sense. Many of the most popular artists are stuck in the bureaucratic process of recording in a studio, outsourcing the mixing, submitting the final product to the record label, making the necessary edits to allow for playing on the radio, and agreeing to a release date to build excitement and push merchandise before fans finally get to see it. Contrast this with the small college band: they can write a new song and perform it at a gig the same day, release to Bandcamp or Soundcloud on their own schedule, and make whatever they wish without restriction. When remaining obscure to the general public of music listeners, one is not tethered by a platform upon which their fame is built—there is no record label, no higher up, not even fans they need to make their music for. Much can be gained by looking into the creative process of a musical group outside of the mainstream and through that see how much reform is needed within the broader context of the music industry.

## **II. About King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard**

King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard is a multi-genre rock band founded in Melbourne, Australia. The group was originally formed around 2010, intended primarily as a fun party band. Once the group's lineup was finalized by 2011, they began releasing albums, beginning with *12 Bar Bruise* in 2012. While known for their psychedelia and progressive rock albums, their forays

into jazz, metal, microtonality, synth, boogie, and even rap have been praised by their fans. King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard (hereafter referred to as King Gizzard for brevity) is composed of seven members: Stu Mackenzie, guitarist, lead vocalist, and the band's founder; Michael "Cavs" Cavanaugh, drummer; Lucas Hardwood, bass; Cook Craig and Joey Walker, both guitar and keyboard; and Ambrose Kenny-Smith, harmonicist and otherwise multi-instrumentalist. Eric Moore, former second drummer, has since left to run King Gizzard's own record label Flightless Records. The band considers Jason Galea, their mixed-medium and graphic artist to be the seventh. Although they have grown to encompass an international audience, King Gizzard has stayed true to their roots in independent rock through a number of means, manifesting in a number of ways. This research paper intends to analyze the creative process of King Gizzard and from that draw conclusions as to how fame leads to stifled creative output.

### **III. The Creative Process**

Stu Mackenzie is the mastermind behind King Gizzard, being the main coordinator in album writing, although the band has certainly become more collaborative as of late. In an interview with Ben Opipari, Stu revealed that he works very well under pressure, both from outside factors and self-imposed deadlines. "It was a challenge to figure out how to create that spark [of collaboration] over a computer screen . . . and I think ultimately it was amazing and great," he said in reference to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mackenzie, "Songwriters on Process" 1:56). Rather than let outside factors hamper the incredibly high creative output King Gizzard is known for, the stress produced *Butterfly 3000*, a synth-pop album developed so far outside their standard workflow that the group admits it has been difficult incorporating it into their live shows. The band embodies the idea of "go with the flow", turning weaknesses into strengths throughout the creative process. "The River", a single released before the album *Quarters!*,

notably has lots of acoustic instrumentation and otherwise folk and jazz elements because they didn't have amps on the tour bus when recording (Taylor). A better example may be the free-flowing experience of recording *Murder of the Universe*. Casey Hartnett, an audio engineer who worked on a number of King Gizzard's recordings, stated "*Murder* was done in three-and-a-half days: an evening's setup, then three days of tracking. . . . If things weren't working, it was just about figuring a workaround" (Hartnett). This makes lots of sense when looking at the broader context of *Murder of the Universe*. Over the course of 2017, the band produced and released five studio albums as a personal goal set by Stu, those being *Flying Microtonal Banana*, the aforementioned *Murder of the Universe*, *Sketches of Brunswick East*, *Polygondwanaland*, and *Gumboot Soup*. The last one had him racing to finish by New Year's, eventually releasing to the public on December 31st (DeVille). By setting a self-imposed deadline, Stu is, counter intuitively, able to work better than with unbridled time. Often, this means working around obstacles efficiently instead of trying to fix them.

Collaboration has been a big element of King Gizzard's creative process. Recently released *Ice, Death, Planets, Lungs, Mushrooms and Lava* was made from hours of jam sessions edited down to a handful of minutes, each song in a different Greek mode. Unlike the 19 minute jam session of "The Dripping Tap", each song was formed from no base at all, just picking a tempo, a key, and a title to begin the collaborative effort (DeVille). More recently, the band has been embracing it overtly now that all members possess complete technical mastery over their instruments; recent shows from 2022's October tour have featured extended jam sessions from both the new album and older ones respun with new material. Inspiration from outside forces have been just as influential as inspiration among members. Stu listens extensively to progressive rock, a habit starting in his childhood. This manifests in the band's love for odd time signatures

and polyrhythms. He remembers the first song he wrote outside of 4/4 was inadvertently inspired by his car's alarm, ringing in a 5/4 ostinato (Mackenzie, "Songwriters on Process" 21:11). After recording it, he heard his alarm once more, noticing the rhythm he had just played was identical to it. The most important non-musical influence on the band's style hasn't been musical at all: classic science fiction novels. When Stu reads, it is primarily fantasy and sci-fi; these themes are common across nearly all of their lyrical content, album and merchandise art, and music videos. Input both internally and externally, and both musically and non-musically, inspire Stu's work in the songwriting process.

As Stu sees it, he works in two different modes: when deciding on an album to pursue, he "fishes" for ideas, considering every option that comes to mind and taking frequent breaks to ensure a proper headspace for creativity. Once settled on an idea, however, he can "spend an endless amount of time in the hole" without experiencing burn-out (Mackenzie, "Songwriters on Process" 25:07). Perhaps this is how King Gizzard maintains its prolific creative output: since the band's inception in 2010, they have released 23 studio albums, countless "official bootlegged" demo tracks and live albums, and 60 music videos. One may bring to question what Stu means by his second creative *modus operandi*; as he puts it, "I want to at least vaguely conceptualize everything—it just makes it easier to write songs. It's as much about talking about what the next record is going to be like before it really shapes up, so you can have a rough idea of what the record is going to sound like" (Emery). This is the idea of a "concept album" in which all the constituent songs form a continuum. Unfortunately, this means many song ideas need to be put away for later usage, eventually culminating in the rare non-concept album like *Gumboot Soup* or *Omnium Gatherum*. For the latter, many songs like "The Dripping Tap" had spent several years in the ether, unable to be put on any of their highly-focused albums

(Mackenzie, “Keep Getting Bigger”). The concept album is essential to the band’s creative output, so much so that its logical extension has been a defining part of the band’s appeal.

#### IV. The Creative Product

*I’m in Your Mind Fuzz*, *Nonagon Infinity*, and *Murder of the Universe* are arguably the most important records from King Gizzard’s discography, making up the bulk of the “Gizzverse”: an interalbum, intermedium shared mythology of musical elements, lyrics, and worldbuilding. These three albums feature a progressive build up in intensity from psychedelic rock to heavy garage rock to full-on metal, and also a build up in oddity. *I’m in Your Mind Fuzz* was originally a standalone album containing fantasy and science fiction elements, but *Nonagon Infinity* expanded on it, making specific references to the first entry in the series through lyrics, musical ideas, and the album art itself. *Murder of the Universe* is a culmination of the shared worldbuilding. Similar to the earlier release *Eyes Like the Sky*, it features audiobook-like narration, crafting an interconnected storyline both within the album and into other elements of the Gizzverse. With a normal concept album, the individual unit of context is a song. With what King Gizzard has crafted, the individual unit of context is an entire album, an all new musical idea dubbed the “hyperalbum” (Ballam-Cross 89). Snippets of the Gizzverse have remained brief outside of these three albums, with one song of continuity appearing on *Polygondwanaland*, a song featuring narration from a Gizzverse character on *Sketches of Brunswick East*, or that same character appearing on the album art for *Fishing for Fishies*. Stu Mackenzie has stated “[the albums] exist in this parallel universe and they’re maybe from different times and places, but they can all co-exist in a meaningful way.” The group remains tongue-in-cheek regarding the existence of an interconnected lore, but the few concrete examples laid forth is all fans need for rampant speculation (Ballam-Cross 70).

King Gizzard founded the record label Flightless Records shortly before releasing their first album, as existing labels refused to sign them (Wallen). One could say this was the best decision in the group's history, as only a similarly independent label could tolerate what King Gizzard releases. Some of their creative decisions are extremely unconventional. Following their first album *12 Bar Bruise* with what is essentially an audiobook—*Eyes Like the Sky*—would never be allowed if they had been signed as a normal rock group. One of the bolder decisions is King Gizzard's stance on bootlegging: they encourage it. Fans are encouraged to record, mix, and sell their own remixes, live albums, and other works of art as long as some are traded to King Gizzard for sale on the official website ("KGLW"). This bootlegger program started with the album *Polygondwanaland*, released in the public domain so that fans could print and sell their own vinyls. Upon its release, the band stated on Facebook, "Ever wanted to start your own record label? GO for it! Employ your mates, press wax, pack boxes. We do not own this record. You do. Go forth, share, enjoy" (DeVille). Another point of oddity: their release schedule. It would be unimaginable for a record label to approve five album releases in a single year, but King Gizzard was able to given their degree of creative control. Three albums were released in October 2022 alone. Many groups need to wait for their label's release schedule before even putting out singles. Singer-songwriter Halsey recently complained that she couldn't release music until she had "engineered a viral moment" on her TikTok account (Kornhaber). Even King Gizzard's recent albums have maintained the same whimsey of an experimental independent artist. Would a musical group signed to a record label ever be allowed to produce music only for intermissions in their concert, let alone a follow-up album? *Made in Timeland* and its anagrammed sequel *Laminated Denim* was created for that exact purpose, its 60 bpm tempo mimicking the ticking of a clock. The latter released with a record jacket made of denim; they're almost

flaunting the amount of control they have at every stage of music: from writing, to recording, to producing, to releasing.

Even barring these examples, almost every King Gizzard record is notable in some way. *Float Along – Fill Your Lungs* was the band's first foray into the psychedelic sound it is now known for. *Quarters!* is made up of four proggy 10 minute, 10 second tracks. *Paper Mâché* *Dream Balloon* is recorded almost exclusively with acoustic instruments. *Nonagon Infinity*'s songs seamlessly play into each other, including the last into the first, making the record “infinite”. *Flying Microtonal Banana* required the band make a suite of Turkish-inspired microtonal instruments, including the famous yellow “flying microtonal banana” guitar; 2021's *K.G.* and *L.W.* are companion albums continuing on their predecessor's microtonality. *Sketches of Brunswick East* is a jazzy album named after Miles Davis's *Sketches Of Spain*, made in collaboration with the Mild High Club. *Fishing for Fishies* and *Infest the Rat's Nest* share pro-environmental themes: one is a lighthearted boogie while the other is harsh thrash metal. *Butterfly 3000* was released alongside a music video for each of its 10 tracks as well as *Butterfly 3001*, an album made entirely from remixes of the former. *Changes*, their latest release, has been in production since 2017; each song is built from one section of chord progressions from the first and title track “Changes” (Slinger). King Gizzard's unprecedented level of eccentricity is the result from purposely retaining a nonconformist outlook towards creativity and, more importantly, not allowing external forces to meddle in their work.

## **V. Correlation Between Creative Output and Freedom**

There are countless reasons as to why King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard are uniquely primed as the most interesting independent artists of our time, and it all stems from their creative freedom. Experimentation into the wild side of music has been at the very heart of this group: experimentation in music genres, hypermusical themes, and physical releases. The reason why King Gizzard has been able to expand from its obscure roots and maintain the same level of creative control is because it has constantly relied on itself to get work done and its fans to support their every endeavor. Since the band's formation, it has always been the same tight-knit group of ten or so, allowing change outside of the band but never internally (Hartnett). Doing so would break the magic they've carefully cultivated over the past 12 years. King Gizzard's creative process is unparalleled in efficiency, owing partly to the masterfully talented Stu Mackenzie and partly to Eric Moore managing the Flightless Records label, allowing them freedom in their pursuits. While more popular bands would have gone "mainstream", King Gizzard remains true to their roots. Popularity may be the goal for many artists, but with it comes too many stickling fans, producers, and business suits you need to please. Relying on yourself, those around you, and your fans is how real music develops.



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