



# REINVENTING THE GREAT AMERICAN ROCK BAND

*The War on Drugs has proven that rock and roll can be epic and humble, classic and brand-new all at once. Can the band's reclusive frontman survive its major-label debut?*



## MUSIC

There's only a faint whiff of weed in the air when Philadelphia rock band the War on Drugs takes the stage at New York's Bowery Ballroom. Adam Granduciel, the band's stoic mastermind, mostly keeps his eyes closed, opening them only to navigate his winking pedal boards. Sharing the cramped stage with a crew of longtime friends—bassist Dave Hartley, keyboardist Robbie Bennett, drummer Charlie Hall and multi-instrumentalists Anthony LaMarca and Jon Natchez—he conjures the aural equivalent of a riptide in slow motion. Somehow the six of them dive headlong into the rawness and romanticism of the AM-era rock-and-roll canon with the precision and restraint of a chamber ensemble.

It's a far cry from the band's early days, when Granduciel shared the stage with former member Kurt Vile. Back then, he sometimes played whole sets on his knees, slinging beers while wailing on his guitar. Tonight Granduciel speaks only when necessary—such as when he introduces a Warren Zevon song that could easily be mistaken for one of his own.

"I sometimes don't understand how our songs get so long," the 38-year-old musician says two weeks earlier at a secluded Bushwick café. His casual appearance onstage and off—T-shirt, black pants, dark messy hair to his clavicle—betrays a thrum of anxiousness. Talking about his coming weeks, which include a spot on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, he taps the metal table incessantly. You get the sense he's still adjusting to his life circa 2014, when the Drugs album *Lost in the Dream* debuted at 26 on the *Billboard* 200 albums chart. Charting is a rare feat for any rock band in a world where popular music overwhelmingly favors more digital-friendly strains. Acts like Twenty One Pilots, Imagine Dragons and Ed Sheeran have kept rock visible, at least, by blending it with rap, EDM, dancehall and other metronomic styles. But with a few exceptions, the only rock outfits competing with bona fide pop stars such as Adele, Beyoncé and Drake are either knighted or dead.

That the War on Drugs made it upstream at all—let alone with instrumentals blooming well past the three-minute mark and musical touchstones including Dire Straits, Pink Floyd and Bruce Springsteen—is in itself noteworthy. But the band's 2013 single "Red Eyes" didn't just dine on novelty; it struck a nerve. Seemingly overnight, backyard gigs turned into national television slots on *Kimmel* and *Fallon*. To date, "Red Eyes" has more than 47 million streams on Spotify. The band's spike in popularity is still

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jarring to its gentle-spirited frontman. "We don't really have the time to grow into the rooms we're playing," Granduciel says. "Now it's like, boom, 6,000 people." And with its new record, *A Deeper Understanding*, the group is in line to take on the mantle of Great American Rock Band. The War on Drugs might just prove that serious album-oriented rock groups can grow as organically on streaming services as they once did via stadium tailgates and record stores.

These days, Granduciel lives with his girlfriend, actress Krysten Ritter, in her Greenpoint apartment. While she films season two of *Jessica Jones*, a leisurely day for the man of the house begins with a carefully prepped cup of coffee ("I may or may not have a fancy setup," he says) and a walk with Ritter's Chihuahua terrier around the park. Ritter was at the Bowery show, leaning against the balcony in an oversize tank top, her ink-black hair drawn up in a high ponytail.

In the nearly two years it took to make *A Deeper Understanding*, Granduciel worried that his peripatetic new life—living in Los Angeles and then Brooklyn, commuting to Philadelphia, booking studio time in all three places and beyond—would compromise his work. But in hindsight, the physical distraction of moving around seems to have tempered Granduciel's obsessiveness. He once allegedly holed up in his house for months, and tales abound that the aptly named *Lost in the Dream* nearly cost him his sanity. Today, he only occasionally summons those monastic instincts. He's healthier, happier, maybe even in love (he smiles but stays mum on that point), and he appears to be at peace—as much as one can expect a perfectionist to be. Consider the new album's encyclopedic credits. "If it says I play synthesizer, that usually means I recorded 10 different synths on that song," he says. He smiles. *Understanding* was recorded in nine studios across L.A., New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Can serenity coexist with this level of obsession? Granduciel pauses, his expression



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY LIEBMAN

turning a shade more serious. "Part of turning something in is being aware that you've missed the mark on a few things."

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Granduciel was raised in Dover, Massachusetts, the middle child of a small-business owner and a Montessori-school administrator who are still married. He went to high school at one of the oldest schools in America. ("Yeah, that was drilled into our heads.") His father spent 40 years in the garment business. At one point he ran 17 stores selling designer clothing that he shuttled from Fashion Avenue in New York City in his Volvo.

"My dad is probably the biggest War on Drugs fan," Granduciel says of his father, who is in his 80s. "He comes on tour with us. He figured out Google Alerts. I'm surprised he's kept up with it as much as he has. He's got these big headphones, and when I go home to visit, I'll see him asleep in the chair and I'll be like, 'Oh my God, he's listening to 'Red Eyes.'" After years of defending life choices that were at times confusing to his parents, sharing the band's success, even over quiet moments such as these, feels like a victory to Granduciel.

Like his father, Granduciel has had an irrepressible work ethic from an early age. "I got in trouble for being an idiot—you know, crashing the car, falling asleep at the wheel." Because he was drunk? High? "No, no," he says. "I was exhausted from fuckin' life. It was tough. All these things to do all the time." He taught himself to play guitar in seventh grade, amassing thick binders of printed-off guitar tabs. ("Basically all of *Siamese Dream*, but I couldn't do the solos.") At Dickinson College, a liberal arts school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, he studied art and waited tables. After graduation, he worked his way through more restaurant jobs in Oakland and then Boston. His career in the service industry nearly ended after he spilled grease on a baby's head at a restaurant that required him to wear an American-flag tie. (The tie, he ruefully adds, was constantly streaked with peppercorn ranch dressing.)

So when Granduciel moved to Philadelphia in 2003, sharing a light blue row house in not-yet-gentrified Fishtown with a revolving set of roommates, he felt liberated—even if the house gave him mold poisoning, he says, laughing. He met

Hartley, now 37, after college, when they were two under-bathed artsy guys working at a real-estate firm near the University of Pennsylvania.

The War on Drugs maintains a practice space in Philadelphia, where core members Hartley, Bennett and Hall currently reside. Tomorrow, Granduciel says, he'll rent a car to drop off some gear and clock in a rehearsal before the band debuts new material on national television. It's a little impractical, but keeping a foothold in Philadelphia is more than just an old habit for Granduciel. It has become part of the band's identity and, by extension, his own.

And identity matters to him, no matter how much he hides behind eyelids, hair and reverb. "I wondered if I had lost a little bit of my identity in my music, and how much of my identity is my music?" he says. "What am I in relation to my music? How much of me singing these songs is a character and how much is my real life?"

Moving around seems to have had a sharpening effect on the band's sound. There's a grandeur and a cohesion to *A Deeper Understanding* that are different from the busy excitement of *Lost in the Dream*. The album's first official

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single, "Holding On," sounds as though Granduciel took a glass pipette to "Thunder Road" and transformed it into an energized new beast. Unlike Springsteen's, Granduciel's process doesn't revolve around lyrics. He spends most of his time tinkering with the instrumentation until the timbres start to tell their own story. But to hear Granduciel describe his work, starting with the arrangement is like entering a palace through the back door. Despite the recognition he has gained, he still carries an element of the amateur.

He's still the kid hiding underneath the covers, studying his pain.

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The conversation never strays far from Granduciel's tumultuous creative process. "I'm learning that I'm more instinctual than I give myself credit for," he says, shifting his weight in his seat. He listens to his demos over and over, with no great design in mind, waiting for that flicker. "Maybe when I was 24 and all I listened to was 1964 and 1966 Bob Dylan, you'd have someone sitting here trying to create a myth around himself," he says. "But it's like there's no more myth. We're just out there doing what we do."

Granduciel's intuition yielded his finest new song, "Thinking of a Place." It's the kind he's always wanted to write—a Tom Joad-style solo-trek song, as he describes it—but he says he never could have done it with just pen and paper.

"I can chip away with ease for months at the

sonics, and it doesn't get me frustrated. The words, though, I get very frustrated," he says. He improvises off a scratch vocal track, which he describes as "total gibberish," while working on the other arrangements. When it's time to focus on the vocals, he'll return to the demos and "chase the inflections" like an audio Rorschach test. "I'm writing around sounds, if that makes any sense," he says. He pauses for a beat. "You're kind of like, 'Well, it doesn't have to be fuckin' Raymond Carver.'"

*It was back in Little Bend that I saw you  
Light was changing on the water  
Where birds above had flown.*

That's how "Place" begins. It's hard to believe the exquisite specificity of the first verse came to him on a whim. "I was like, 'little bend?' I didn't even know what it was," he says. "It was syllables. I did some research on the words *little bend*, and it turns out it was this beautiful RV park on the banks of the Missouri River. Then it becomes something, like how do I tie this into a story?"

*There was pain in your eyes  
So you vanished in the night  
Missouri River in the distance  
So I lied upon the lawn.*

He goes on. "Every song kind of lives in that state for six or seven months, and everything's

in flux. Every song has its bit of improvisation." He flashes a smile, suddenly aware he's talking too fast. "It's a roundabout way to end up somewhere, but it's what you gotta do, I guess."

On *A Deeper Understanding*, Granduciel had a writing partner—in spirit, anyway—in Bruce Springsteen. When Granduciel was living in Hollywood in 2015, he rediscovered the 1980 double album *The River* and recognized the chill of uncertainty in Springsteen's voice as his own.

"It's a record about being 30 years old, watching your friends have kids and families, and thinking, When am I going to enter that part of my life?" he says. "I think that's what I sought, what I was trying to get to on this record. I'm a little older than the Boss was then, but how am I part of this whole thing, you know?"

Granduciel looks up from the table. It's almost time to go home and feed the dog. "I also figured out I could drive from my studio to my house in Hollywood in about one 'The River,'" he notes of the album's title track. His eyes darken to a smile. At the Bowery show, his father wears a nearly identical expression as he shoots an iPhone video from the balcony. He's focusing not on his son onstage but on the crowd below, bobbing and swaying to the music. It's a scene neither could have imagined just a few years ago. And it's a fitting beginning for a new album derived from traveling down—and trusting in—new roads.

"Seven minutes," says Granduciel. "No traffic. All green lights." ■