Hackers &lley

Interviewed by The Silver Age July 5th, 2024

Hackers &lley is an experimental pop duo based in Akron, Ohio. Comprised of Kyle and Charlie, students at Kent State. Hackers &lley uses a variety of digital and analog effects to create an electronic soundscape. They are currently working on their first album, tentatively called *If I Don't Get the Number of 420 Girls, I'm Gonna Die in a Lot of Different Ways*. For updates and future shows, follow their Instagram @Hackers_4lley.

ALICIA LOPEZ: Okay, so basic info. What are your names, ages, the place that you're based, and what instruments do you play in the band?

KYLE: My name is Kyle. I recently moved to Akron in the past couple of years for college, which is where I met Charlie. We go to music school together. In Hackers &lley, I play more of a production role. I play drums in most musical projects that I'm a part of, but Hackers is something that's more of a passion project for me, so I'm starting to branch out. I will be doing vocals. I'll be doing effects and using electronics and other incorporations to branch out in a variety of sounds.

CHARLIE: I'm Charlie, I am 24, and I've lived in Akron, Ohio all my life. I started going to KSU Stark for music tech in the spring of 2020. I ended up taking a year off because of COVID then after I came back, I met Kyle and I started going over to his house a bunch and we slowly started to realize we were on the same creative page on a lot of things. Kind of like him, I would say that I'm a multi-instrumentalist. My main instrument, so to speak, would be singing and playing guitar. But with Hackers &lley, I feel like it's a pretty even split of creative input from both sides. We both play production roles. We both play effects roles. We both do vocals. It's kind of just like a cohesive unit.

A.L.: Kyle, are you also 24?

KYLE: I am 21. I just turned 21.

A.L.: What type of music would you say Hackers &lley is genre-wise?

CHARLIE: That's a hard question to answer because we live in a time where genre is kind of... we're just mixing everything with everything now. When people ask us what Hackers &lley is, I like to say, sophisticated hyperpop.

KYLE: Experimental, electronic.

CHARLIE: I feel like experimental pop is probably the best generic genre term you could put on our thing, because we do pop songs, but we also just run everything through crazy distortion plugins –

KYLE: and electronics and different time signatures.

CHARLIE: We try to strike a happy balance between avant-garde and pop catchiness, you know?

A.L.: Name origin?

KYLE: Hackers &lley, the way that we spell it with an ampersand is an anagram for Charles & Kyle.

CHARLIE: It's just both of our names. I just kind of randomly came upon that by specifically trying to search for an anagram, and that kind of just popped into my head.

KYLE: It really aligns with the electronic kind of visual...

CHARLIE: Yeah, and the kind of grimy nature of our sound. We have a lot of noisier, kind of scuzzier elements to our production. And obviously we have a very digital approach to our music, so the name "Hackers" fit. And the imagery of an alley full of like dirty scoundrel hackers. It's just very, very cool to us.

A.L.: You guys met in college? Were you in a class together, or did you meet through some extracurricular? Through friends?

CHARLIE: We met in theory one, baby!

KYLE: Music theory one! Shout out to Sebastian Birch!

A.L.: How long have you guys been playing music individually? And also when did Hackers start?

CHARLIE: I have been producing music on my own since I was in seventh grade-ish. I started doing dubstep, and then I got into lo-fi hip hop, and then I found out about Death Grips, and they kind of shattered all of my ideas of what music could be. Since then I've just steadily been experimenting more and more. I actually have a solo project by the name of Big Happy that I have been sort of nursing since like 2016.[1]

KYLE: I grew up in a really small farm town – like I said, I only moved to Akron for college when I was 18. Growing up out there we had really slow internet, and I couldn't live the typical teenage lifestyle of a middle school kid, like sitting on their Xbox or anything. So I naturally gravitated towards instruments, and my dad

---

[1] ig: @bighappy2000

plays in a band with some of his friends, so he had a drum kit around, and I've been playing drums since like before I could reach the foot pedals. He would sit me on his lap. And that kind of internalized drumming to be something that's natural, that I don't have to think about. Then once I got to middle school and joined the small school band – I was in a graduating class of like 40 kids, it was a super small school – I really excelled in that. I would do one instrument for like two years, and then switch to piano, and switch to bass, and switch to guitar, until I graduated and moved out here. Out there I didn't really have a ton of exposure to experimental music, because everybody out there mainly listens to country music, but at the end of high school I was into a lot of other genres like jazz and hip-hop and starting to branch out and find my own individual tastes. Then when I got to college, I met people like Charlie, who really pulled me out of my shell and introduced me to hyperpop and more experimental genres and really made me fall in love with that side of music, every time we create something, trying to make something that hasn't been heard before instead of working off of a formula or a blueprint or something.

A.L.: Are you self-taught, or musically trained? Sounds like a little bit of both maybe, through school and also at home.

CHARLIE: Definitely a little bit of both. I think we were teaching ourselves pretty heavily...

KYLE: Prior to college.

CHARLIE: The music tech program at Kent is a part of the broader school of music. So they do make you attend concerts, you have to go through all theory classes, you've got to pick a primary instrument to take lessons for. So like, we do have a little bit of scholarly rote training, and that definitely has – I would say that that definitely has come in handy.

KYLE: Immensely. Especially in terms of mixing and production.

CHARLIE: Oh, well, yeah. Mixing and production things, of course. I mean, that's what we go to – that's kind of what we're there for.

KYLE: Right, that's what we're specifically doing degrees for.

CHARLIE: At least that's what I'm there for. When I first started going, I was like, "oh, I just gotta get through all of these music classes." But it turns out that knowing the math and all the formulas behind how to write music makes writing music more easy and fun. What do you know?

A.L.: What are your musical influences?

KYLE: We could rattle on this for hours.

CHARLIE: Opening up the floodgates.

KYLE: I wouldn't go past 10.

CHARLIE: I don't even know if I can name 10. My main influences are... I would say I'm really into early 2000s indie and late '90s alternative. So as a kid, my parents were really big on showing me early Beck and Ween and Radiohead. So I was kind of fucked from the rip. Then later, as I was growing up, I got more and more into electronic music. I did have a mini metal phase when I was really into System of a Down and Linkin Park and stuff. I was really into extreme music from a young age, and I think that kind of primed me for being as into crazy noise shit as I am now. It was an interesting pipeline from Slipknot to Skrillex to Aphex Twin. And now I would say that my biggest bands that have influenced me would be like Aphex Twin, Death Grips, Animal Collective, Xiu Xiu, LCD Soundsystem, definitely Radiohead, and definitely Beck, like the *Mellow Gold/Odelay* era. And yeah, that's pretty much it. Oh yeah, I'm also really, really, *really* into house and techno music. That's what I've been into for like the past couple of years. Alright, I'm passing it to Kyle.

KYLE: Alright, when I was young, like I said, my parents exposed me to a lot of country music. My dad is a big like '70s classic rock guy, so I was exposed to bands like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden and things like that, like really early. From there, as I got older, I really started to gravitate towards soul and jazz and funk specifically. Some of those main influences being like James Brown, and specifically his drummer, Clyde Stubblefield. There was this song called "Funky Drummer," and there's this iconic break from it, and I would listen to that loop for hours and hours and try and be just like Clyde Stubblefield. But from there, tons of other soul and jazz influences like Miles Davis and John Coltrane and all the huge names that everybody knows in the jazz community. But as I got older in high school, I really fell in love with '90s style hip hop. That is probably like where Charlie sits with House and Techno. That's where I sit with '90s hip hop.

CHARLIE: That's like your main beloved genre of music.

KYLE: Right. Also, like how Charlie has Big Happy, his solo project, I have a solo project with another artist that is... well, that's not a solo project, but it's '90s hip hop based. Some of our huge influences in the '90s hip hop style are definitely producers like J Dilla and DJ Shadow and Pete Rock, Peanut Butter Wolf and MCs like MF Doom and groups like A Tribe Called Quest and Wu-Tang and De La Soul and everything in between. Some really original sounds too, like KRS-One and Grandmaster Flash and stuff like that too. And then like I said, when I got to college, I really started to fall in love with hyperpop. I really like 100 gecs and this artist called 454. I've been really obsessed with his album *FAST TRAX 3*. I just love really unique, modern music that is standoffish and hard to find anything that's similar to. Me and my girlfriend have been obsessed with the new Charli XCX album. So is Charlie.

CHARLIE: It's pretty good.

KYLE: It's pretty good.

A.L.: What's the name of your other project?

KYLE: The other project is – the album is called *The Man, The Mouse, and The Machine* and the artists are – the main MC goes by OSD, which is short for "the Original Sound Director." Then his little brother, MC Mouse is the second MC. And then I just go by K Swym on that album, which should be coming out very soon, sometime this year.

A.L.: Specifically for Hackers &lley, what does the music writing process look like?

CHARLIE: We pretty much just huddle around Kyle's laptop and –

KYLE: A mass amount of gear.

CHARLIE: Yeah, we've just now gotten this cool studio setup going on. We've got a lot more hardware to work with, which is cool, but for the past few years, it's pretty much just been "huddle around Kyle's laptop." Me and Kyle's approach to making music is very different because I am a very slow worker. I like to gestate over ideas and Kyle is a lot more spontaneous, and I feel like that's how I try to work when I'm working with him. We kind of just go in, and if one of us has a base idea for a song, we'll just sketch it out. That can look like either a drum loop on a drum machine or just a little synth riff. We usually just start from one element and then kind of add incremental layers and effects along the way that we think would sound cool and interesting. We try to just make stuff happen in kind of a lightning-in-a-bottle sense.

KYLE: Like in-the-moment type of creation. Like Charlie mentioned, originally, we were mainly operating in the box, like in the laptop, but in the past couple of months we've had access to a lot more hardware around. That's allowed us to really get more experimental with the sources for our sounds rather than just using a bunch of plugins or VSTs and has really got us into the analog side of audio. We have an acoustic drum set and mixer, and we built a rack, and we've been experimenting and really finding our sound and exploring with vocal production and effects. We really have this aim when we're creating to constantly [make it so] a listener could not possibly lose attention. There's so much happening, there's so much variety, there's so much ear candy.

CHARLIE: We really try to imbue our music with our collective ADHD. We try to make music that – exactly like you said – is just completely attention grabbing and is just...

KYLE: Puzzling, if anything.

CHARLIE: I mean that's another element of our process. We pretty much either sketch something out or Kyle will be playing on this virtual drum kit that we have, and one of us will just – I'd like to think we have a "no idea is a bad idea until we find out" thing.

KYLE: Yeah, nothing's off the table.

CHARLIE: And so in that way we've discovered crazy shit, like if we put the audio out of the v-kit directly into this specific distortion plugin and do these settings [phone call cut out here] It's super like punchy but also just extremely attention grabbing, and that's kind of what we're going for.

KYLE: I think, like I mentioned earlier, Hackers &lley is definitely a passion project for both of us, and it's in the most true sense possible just making the music that we want to make, rather than music that we think will garnish us attention or fame or anything like that. It's just truly music that appeals to us. I think two main factors of that are, like I said, we both go to music school, we both have tons of musical influences, and we're both really familiar with lots and lots of influences and the similarities between them and how they all relate, and I think in our music creation process we really try to make something that, out of the long long list that both of us have heard in our lives, is nowhere close to anything on there. Just truly stands alone and is unique and in tandem with...

CHARLIE: I feel like that might be hyping it up.

KYLE: That might be hyping up a little bit.

CHARLIE: There's a lot of moments – I would actually go against that. I would actually argue that there are many moments – I guess specifically for me – where we'll be doing shit and I'll be like "dude this sounds fucking just like Aphex Twin," "dude this sounds just like Death Grips," but like not in the sense that I'm *trying* to sound like them, it's just like the sound reminds me of them and embodies what I want to achieve in my music. You know what I mean?

KYLE: Right. I guess what I was getting at with that is like the juxtaposition of "this might sound like Aphex Twin" and "this might sound like Death Grips," but how often do you hear those two things in a verse and chorus that are right after one another or something like that.

CHARLIE: Well ultimately we take those influences, and then we push towards other influences that are maybe more accessible, more catchy, more like "pop sensibility," and that's another big part of Hackers &lley. We are very committed to our own sound and our own style, and we don't necessarily consider anyone else, but we are also both very committed to catchiness, like basic song structure. We're not going balls-to-the-wall or anything.

KYLE: It's still our aim to get people to obviously feel an emotion from a certain song and move to songs and everything in between.

CHARLIE: I think we're just both really anti-generic, and that's what we try to avoid at every step of the way.

A.L.: I haven't heard any of your stuff yet, but you said you are both contributing vocals. Does your music have lyrics, and if you do have lyrics, how do you go about writing them?

CHARLIE: So we are just now kind of entering into the lyric writing phase. We've always intended to have lyrics and a vocal element in the song, but I guess for me subject matter is a source of writer's block, but I think we're just kind of – we're both at a point where we're just kind of not really going to care too much about that.

KYLE: Right. I think sometimes we get hung up on lyrics quite often because we try – and especially in Charlie's solo project, Big Happy, I'd say a lot of his lyrics are... if you sit down and you actually listen to the meaning, there is an overarching story, and it's all on topic, but it's kind of atypically phrased to catch your ear in the same way that the production has weird ear candy to catch your ear. So sometimes we kind of get lost in how specifically weird we want to say a simple thing or something like that. Sometimes we kind of over-complicate things, and like Charlie said, we have a tendency to ADHD out and spiral sometimes. We do have a lot of different vocal styles. Charlie tends to be more in a singer-songwriter style, and he sings a lot for his Big Happy project, and I'll be joining him with that. But I think that a lot of my vocals will probably lean towards more of like a hip hop or rap style, but both will have a slew of vocal effects in a hyperpop or Death Grips style.

CHARLIE: Yeah. That's the biggest thing, is we're both very into vocal processing, you know, vocoders, just altering the human voice in ways to just make it unrecognizable and eerie or what have you.

A.L.: For Hackers, you talked a little bit about the name and the genre. What themes are you looking to explore through the music for this group?

CHARLIE: That's a good question. I think probably just themes of individuality and being yourself and how that interfaces with the technological dystopia that we've found ourselves in. Definitely tying in with the hackers thing, I feel like the lyrics that I've drafted for Hackers &lley are like – a lot of it is just purely abstract imagery, but I also sort of am trying to like play this exaggerated characterized version of myself, and I would say the vibe I'm going for with Hacker lyrics is sort of playing a character of this seedy hacker guy that has psychic powers or some kind of mystic ability, and I'm flexing that, over flexing money and watches or whatever. I'm flexing my wizard abilities and just kind of going down a sort of more fantastical route than like realistic and grounded. I'm going for more surreal imagery.

KYLE: I think that overall the project has like a very immersive soundscape, and it it differs a lot from track to track or even from A side to B side of a specific track, but I think it is a very modern adaptation of a unique, "be

yourself," independent album, and I think that some of the themes that really resonate with it are "it's completely normal to be weird and goofy" and just like "who cares what people think." Like I said, we're making the music for ourselves and nobody else, but we hope everybody else resonates the same way we do with it.

CHARLIE: It's all about embracing it by writing lyrics roleplaying as a hacker wizard in an alley.

KYLE: Exactly, and that's the only way we can do that, you know, is by being hacker wizards.

A.L.: It sounds like y'all are like working on an album now, is that right?

CHARLIE: Yeah we're working towards an album or mini-album project.

KYLE: Right, we're finishing our first project.

A.L.: Do you know what it's going to be called yet or know a general release timeline?

CHARLIE: We've been floating around the name *If I Don't get the Number of 420 Girls, I'm Gonna Die in a Lot of Different Ways*. It's a little long, if you just want to shorten it to "420 Girls," that might fit on the page better.

KYLE: It's a working title.

COLE GABORIAULT: I'd say it works pretty well.

A.L.: Why are you a musician?

CHARLIE: I think it's a morning routine for me to like to look really hard into the mirror and ask myself that every day. But I think the simple answer is it's just kind of…

KYLE: It's a universal language, that's one thing…

CHARLIE: I mean, to be honest for me, it's just kind of what I do. My entire life, I've never once thought I was gonna do anything other than creative work. My life's aspiration is to somehow help people through my art. Put my art out there, and hopefully someone out there sees it and sees themself within it, because seeing myself and actualizing myself through art has helped me in innumerable ways throughout my life, and I want to provide that quote unquote "service" for other people.

KYLE: Right. We know what those influences have meant for us. Even if there's one person it slightly helps or slightly resonates with, it's all worth it.

CHARLIE: Yeah. I have a personal philosophy that entertainment is a very important thing, and it's something that should be taken seriously. Not insanely seriously, but people should make art from the heart more often. I feel like that's one of the things that makes us human, and that's one of the things that just makes the world go around. That's my excuse. I've been lucky enough to have a family and friends who've supported me along the way. I've never had that much pushback in my life for wanting to pursue being an artist, and that is not the experience for a lot of people, so I'm really really grateful. I think that's also helped me just go full on into being a creative.

KYLE: Yeah, I was pretty much just gonna say the same thing. I couldn't really see myself doing anything else. I definitely in early high school had thoughts of going down a more typical career path and pursuing something that would have better job security or a better salary or something, but after spending those last years of high school with the friends from my hometown and just making music with them, it was like, why try and do anything else if I'm happy doing this? If this is what I'm good at, then why should I try and beat around the bush and be somebody that I'm not? Why live 80 years being a statistician or something that I don't want to be and then die with slightly more money than if I died at 80 years old with less money and I was more happy because I had 10 albums out? Like I said before, it's purely just a passion thing. And leaving something behind, also. From the point when we finish this album this year, there will always be tangible evidence of what me and Charlie have done in the past two or three years, and that's kind of irreplaceable.