

HELLO WHIRLED

Interviewed by The Silver Age, June 9th, 2024

Hello Whirled is the solo project of Ben Spizuco, a musician based in Philadelphia. At the time of interview, Spizuco was preparing his 50th album, *50 Songs*, for release in August of 2024. *50 Songs* will (along with the other 49 Hello Whirled albums) be available on Bandcamp and Spotify. More information about Hello Whirled can be found on his website, hellowhirled.org.

ALICIA LOPEZ: I've got your name, Ben Spizuco.

HELLO WHIRLED: Mm-hmm.

A.L.: How old are you?

H.W.: I'm 25, Same age as Dan.¹

COLE GABORIAULT: That makes sense.

A.L.: Where are you based?

H.W.: I'm in Philadelphia.

A.L.: Did you go to college and if so, what for?

H.W.: I went to the College of New Jersey up in Ewing, near Trenton with a major in digital media and a minor in music technology.

A.L.: What type of music would you say you play?

H.W.: For the sake of not making this section too long, I tend to just say lo-fi indie rock. Although I'd say it's gotten heavier and noisier over time.

A.L.: How long have you been playing music for?

¹ Dan, aka Signal Valley, is Ben's twin brother.

H.W.: Oh god, I gotta do some math right now. I'd say 15 years. Hello Whirled in particular has been around for 8 years.

A.L.: Are you self taught or are you musically trained?

H.W.: I was trained on guitar. I took guitar lessons for eight years. All the other instruments I taught myself.

A.L.: What instruments do you play?

H.W.: I play guitar. I play guitar, bass, drums, and some keyboards and I sing as well

A.L.: Musical influences? I know Robert Pollard is like a major one. Do you have other musical influences?

H.W.: He's *the* one. Guided By Voices are the single biggest influence on my music. And I'd say no one comes close, but I think over the years, some other bands have reshaped how I think about making – I'll list some other bands. Wire, Deerhoof, Stereo Lab, Mount Eerie. I think that's a good list actually.

A.L.: Perfect. So what's your music writing process?

H.W.: Most of the time I sit down at my computer with my DAW open and I fiddle around on guitar until I come up with something that kind of sounds like a song. Then I keep recording takes over and over again until it actually resembles a song and there's something of a structure to it.

A.L.: How do you approach writing your lyrics specifically?

H.W.: Lyrics tend to be written *for* the music. Every now and again, I'll do lyrics first, and those are usually the really strange words, because they're not connected to anything. I don't know, I could spend an hour talking about how I write lyrics and still not be sure how I do it. I'm gonna ramble a little here because that's actually an interesting question. I've been told that I write good lyrics. It doesn't feel that way, but I'm glad people like them. I don't like writing words down just to have something to sing, but I also don't usually rewrite lyrics once I've written them. Once I have a set of lyrics it's like "alright, these are the words," and that's that. For lyrics I try to get it right the first time. I think a lot of the time I'll record them not one line at a time, but one section of the song at a time, usually going from beginning to end, not a lot of like... I don't know. One of my friends way back when once asked me if I wrote my lyrics one line at a time because he said they seemed really stream of consciousness. I think that's fair. Some of the words definitely are.

C.G.: Then related to that, what kind of themes do you generally explore in your songwriting?

H.W.: I feel like the majority of my lyrics fall into one of two camps, which is either anger at what I believe to be dangerous politics destroying the world, or anger at myself – not anger at myself, but reckoning with how unequipped I often feel to deal with the world around me.

A.L.: You have themes of dangerous politics and coping with dangerous politics and it feels like things are getting worse.

H.W.: Yeah, it does feel like the state of things is getting worse for sure, but then a lot of it is also just dealing with my own baggage that isn't really related to anything socio-political. I don't write a lot of happy lyrics. It's not emo or anything, it's just it's hard to write about the good times.

A.L.: So what are you working on now? The 50th album?

H.W.: Yes. I'm working on the 50th Hello Whirled album. It will be called *50 Songs*. It's called that because it's going to have 50 songs. I'm glad you brought that up because I actually finished three more songs today. So right now there are 18 songs done. A whole lot more in the works. The funny thing is even so far, because I can write fairly easily and as a result I do it a lot, there are already outtakes. There's stuff I've written that I know isn't going on this album.

A.L.: Do you remember how old you were when you wrote your first song?

H.W.: Probably very little because Dan from Signal Valley and I both – I don't think they could even tell you a time before we loved the Beatles. I'm not really a Beatles guy anymore, but I certainly was when I was a kid, so I have memories of sitting around making up little songs, singing, or probably screaming, I guess, because I was a kid. I guess that's not really formal songwriting, but it's always been there. The drive to want to write my own songs has always been there, and with any luck it will never go away.

A.L.: Fingers crossed.

H.W.: Yeah, I want to I want to be 75 years old and still be writing songs.

C.G.: You'll be releasing your 500th album by that point.

H.W.: I mean a large – you don't have to include this bit, but

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A.L.: Yeah, that's an impressive amount of work. Okay, so then I wanted to ask a little bit about some of your side projects: Embalming Druid, Bushworms, Crawling Visitors.

H.W.: You did your research. Oh man. So, Bushworms is me and Ethan Oliva. He's a Pittsburgh musician in a whole bunch of bands up there. He's in Ex Pilots, who just opened for Cherry Glazer for a few shows, Gaadge, Sober Clones, and Living World, which is a hardcore band. I've been a fan of his music for a decade now, and we've been friends almost as long, so it was just a matter of time before we actually made anything together. We should have an album out I'd like to say sometime this summer, but it's still the longest I've ever worked on an album. It's been almost two years and it still isn't done.

A.L.: Do you know what that one's gonna be called?

H.W.: I forget which order it is, but I think it's gonna be called *Star Planet*. So that's Bushworms. The Crawling Visitors is me and a musician from Maryland named Patrick Cutter. He makes some really out-there electronic stuff. I know him at all because his dad, Matthew Cutter, is the singer in some bands I like, Joseph Airport and Rectangle Creep. He also wrote the official biography for Robert Pollard from Guided by Voices. I asked him to make an album with him and he said, "I'm kind of busy right now, but my son's pretty available. You should go ask him." So Patrick sent me some really strange instrumentals, then I sent him – I think because I was already working on 50 songs, I was like, "I want to be careful about where I put my best ideas." I didn't give him junk, but I looked through some older instrumentals I had sitting around, and I was like, "okay, I would like to hear finished versions of these. Let me see what he can do." I think he's on a musical hiatus right now, so I don't know when there will be a second album from the Crawling Visitors, but I do know that hearing his vocals over top of some *very* old instrumentals of mine made me truly happy.

Then Embalming Druid, it is me, Dan from Dirtman and Rectangle Creep, and then Joe from Physarum, some bands I know on the internet who I enjoy a good bit. I only sing for that and those two write the music. They write really sludgy dissonant kind of stuff so it doesn't really sound all that much like Hello Whirled. We finished album number two I think February or March and the album's not out yet but it will come out this year. It's done and it's good.

A.L.: Do you have any other art or hobbies outside of music? Things you like to do?

H.W.: I play a lot of video games.

A.L.: Favorites?

H.W.: Well, within the last week or so, I beat three games that I'd say are all pretty good. Am I gonna name those or... Let me think. I'll just say that I've been on a *Dragon Quest* kick for the last year and it's not going away, so

that's what I'm really into right now. I think a week and a half or so ago, I beat a game that came out this year called *Unicorn Overlord* that I thought was fantastic. I'm shouting that out because I don't tend to beat games the year they come out so I'm proud of the fact that I can actually have a game of the year this year.

A.L.: We'll put that in print. Our final planned question is: why are you a musician?

H.W.: At this point I've been so invested in music and songwriting and listening to other people's music and learning something from that, or writing my own stuff and learning stuff from what I do on my own. Truth be told, I don't really know why anymore. I don't have a reason necessarily, it's just become something that I'm incredibly good at versus basically everything else in the world that I'm not all that good at. I don't know, that's not a great answer. Let me think of something better. I don't know, I mean I find it fulfilling and sort of life-affirming to just keep coming up with new songs and new ideas and then occasionally playing them in front of people.

I don't get as much of a rush from that- from performing- as much as I do writing and recording, but I think people care a little more about shows than recordings, so I have to... I don't really compromise on my music at all, but for presenting it to the world, I figure I can make some concessions. I was very anti-performing for a while. I didn't really like the idea of doing it. I didn't enjoy it when I did. I think it was when stuff really started opening back up in like 2021, I started playing a little more and I got more comfortable doing that then. I mean, I moved to Philly so I could play more and go to more shows, so I came around to it. It just came late. It's okay because in April, I played four shows in four weekends, four weekends in a row. I had a show every weekend and I was exhausted, but I was happy to do it. I was happy with how that turned out, and I'm happy with some stuff I have lined up in the summer, including your show. Who else is on the bill if you don't mind me asking?

C.G.: It's you, Super Jack, us, and then we're looking for a fourth band. We haven't selected one yet.

A.L.: Yeah. Do you know King Puzzle?

H.W.: Oh! Wow. Yeah. I just saw- I saw King Puzzle at Porchfest. Louise from King Puzzle – I've known Louise for years. Louise played on half a Hello Whirled album four years ago. When COVID hit, I was in a position where I had actually been trying to get a band together. I was on the verge of releasing an album called *Atlantic Witchcraft*, which is still, I think, one of the best things I've ever made. I realized, well, there aren't gonna be shows this year. So I thought, instead of trying to get a band together to do shows, I'll get a band together to make an album and I wrote a bunch of songs specifically to be played with a band. So I didn't write bass parts, I didn't write drum parts and for a while, the bassist for that was Louise. Then I think in August or September, they're like, "I'm really busy and I can't do the rest of the album." Which is fine. I think three other people, including myself, handled the rest of the parts, but they are on most of the first half of that album. so they have left their mark.

A.L.: I wanted to ask you since you've got so much stuff, what song or album would you recommend to somebody who has never seen any of your stuff before?

H.W.: Songs are cool, but I like albums more, so I'm gonna recommend some albums. Albums with good songs on them. I mean, if someone is in a rush or something and they can really only listen to one song, there's one on the last album called "Jack of Legs" that I think is a good starting point. That's probably one of my most accessible songs. Very straightforward power pop. Then I guess that whole album, *Fractions of Worlds*, I think is a good starting point. There was one from last year called *No Use Crying Over Spilled Blood*. That's another good starting point. Then I put out four, I think it was four, albums in 2021. One of them is really bad, but the other three I think have all held up incredibly well. I don't know, I mean, I can say whatever, but back in 2017, someone covered me on their blog and they said, "the best way to get into Hello Whirled is to just find an album cover you like." So I honestly think at this point, that's the best advice. Dig through the Spotify or if you really want to jump in, the Bandcamp and just find some art that looks cool and play that.

A.L.: Is there anything that we've missed? Anything we didn't ask about?

H.W.: I didn't always have the most open mind about music, but it's definitely gotten blown completely open in the last few years. I feel a lot of the stuff I listen to is stuff that there's a degree of which I would like Hello Whirled to sound like. There's also stuff I listen to that I know I can't do, like some of the really weird electronic stuff I've been getting into. It's like, "yeah, I just don't know how to do this stuff at all. I don't think like that." I don't know how to use sequencers or anything. Like I'm not good with MIDI. I don't know why I like playing things.