

## Brainwashed - Haley Fohr: A life's worth of living in 20 years

Written by Justin Spicer

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Fraught with peril and lost love, Circuit Des Yeux's three albums (and various tapes and 7-inch releases) ring with visions of a life too cruel to exist. That such a landscape is the masterwork of a woman just touching her early 20s is all the more odd. But such is the world of Haley Fohr, a woman whose vibrant personality turns sour and dark within the world of Circuit Des Yeux. It's the return of the Dust Bowl, it's the loss of every love, and the allure of sin wrapped up in discordance. Though Fohr's despondent melodies echo of a forgotten era, it's her wailing, seductive vocals that truly sing the song of the Sirens. Haley Fohr was kind enough to lift the veil and speak to me via e-mail about her recent album, *Portrait*, her collegiate pursuits, and touring Europe for the first time.



**Justin Spicer:** What's the first memory you have pertaining to music (the first song you remember hearing, your first album purchase, etc.)?

**Haley Fohr:** I have two very distinct memories pertaining my first encounters with music. First, "The Tecumseh Middle School Chilli Supper of 2000". I was in 6th grade and had my first solo. I remember I had braces, awkwardly had my hair pulled back in these butterfly clips (those girls

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who grew up in the '90s know what I'm talking about), and had a couple too many hot dogs. My parents were preparing for the worst, afraid of what was about to come out of my mouth as I stood front and center behind the microphone. Whatever did come out of my mouth was something neither of them ever expected. I was enrolled in private lessons a couple weeks after, continuing for the next 9 years. My second distinct memory is my first album purchase. I was 17 and had just moved into my first sublet, and strolled down to Downtown Records, the local record shop in Lafayette. I picked up Brainbomb's "Cheap EP" and Billy Holiday's "Stormy Blues". It didn't seem so strange back then, but looking back I guess my music could be very much be tied to either of these records, musically speaking.

**JS:** When did you begin making music?

**HF:** I'd been singing for quite some time, but none of it was ever an artistic expression. I would go and compete, learn these songs in Italian, French, and whatever, then sing in front of a panel. It really wasn't too exciting. In 8th grade I received my first guitar, and decided it would be nice to use it as my own outlet. I taught myself a few things, or just played around really. I started my first band Cro Magnon in 2007, where I entirely made up chords strumming with a quarter instead of a pick. Circuit Des Yeux evolved shortly after, in 2007, after I moved back in with my parents. I remember I was really into Jandek and Mars at the time, and sort of in this dark bubble.

**JS:** How did your time at Purdue University (and your eventual move to Bloomington, Indiana to study at Indiana University) have any influence on your music?

**HF:** Graduating high school was a strange thing for me. There's so much pressure in American society on the younger generation. "Congratulations, you've graduated! You've got so much ahead of you! Our future is in your hands!" I enrolled into the Nuclear Engineering program in Purdue and felt completely lost. I remember I would eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner every night completely alone, I could never sleep, never did my homework, and eventually flunked out after a couple years. Right when my life was supposed to be taking off, I felt it falling apart. After taking a year off, I applied and was accepted into the IU Recording Arts Program. They only accept 15 people a year from all around the world, and that was a confidence boost I needed. Since then, my records are slowly becoming higher fidelity, and I'm learning more and more ways how to control sound, and get across what it is I'm trying to do musically.

**JS:** What drew you to study ethnomusicology?

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**HF:** I'm very much drawn to the idea that any person on this earth can be a musician. There are so many different types of music, and there is large evidence that this vast spectrum is due to cultural surroundings. People are born and grow in all different directions. I really wish I could visit and meet all these people, but all I have as transportation is my record player. You can find out so many clues and information on a person or a place and time through sound. It's much like a time vault, in a snapshot, or in this case, 4 minutes of a song.

**JS:** How does your interest in ethnomusicology influence your own songwriting process? On how you record?

**HF:** "World music" isn't exactly a genre, but it is a category on iTunes. I like to think of it more as a way of saying "music that is unfamiliar to your culture," or in our case the Western World. If appreciated, this type of music can expand people's definition of music. There is also this honesty, complete humility, and sense of the human hand in many archived recordings that I really just love. With *Circuit Des Yeux* I to strive to be 100% honest, make it very human, document what is my life as it comes, and keep it 100% DIY. It is all very mood oriented. If I am in a darker place, I find myself producing challenging, disorienting music, that some people may not consider music at all, but maybe hopefully it can help expand some minds.

**JS:** There's an old voice to your songs, particularly those that tap into the stark imagery of pre-war blues, folk, and jazz. Is it unconscious or a further interpretation of your studies?

**HF:** I've always considered myself an old soul. I spend many of my Friday nights wrapped in an electric blanket, drinking tea, and listening to records. I always thought I was cursed with this lower registered voice. You really can't make it in Theater or Opera if your vocal range is as low as most men. In high school I gravitated towards singers like Ma Rainey, Memphis Minnie, Etta James, Billy Holiday, and Mahalia Jackson. "Stormy Weather" is still my favorite song to sing to this day. As for my recordings, I never try to "channel" any sort of sound, it's just how I sound.

**JS:** You also study recording--what have you taken from your studies that you used during the making of *Portrait*?

**HF:** Well, I know how to set up and record using a microphone now, which is leaps and bounds from my first record. While recording "*Portrait*", I had only attended a year of recording school, so I focused on trying for cleaner tracks, and less on production values. It's a pretty straight forward record. I wanted it to sound somewhat warm, or timeless. To do this, I EQ'd the record to fall under 4,000 Hertz, and had it mastered through a tube preamp, and onto VHS.

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**JS:** Do you have a recording philosophy or style that you're gravitating toward, or will future releases find you continuing to explore different set-ups in and out of the studio?

**HF:** For now it is easiest for me to record at home. Unfortunately I only have 1 microphone, that is hardly "high quality", and a couple guitars. I've retired recording to my 4-track and use Protools at the moment. I have so many ideas in my head that I'm collecting for the next record. I'd like to do my next record in a studio on 1" or 2" tape. I can feel myself working in a more compositional way, which would be very good for a studio I think. I am becoming more and more confident in my talent as an engineer, and would like to have a record that fully embodies what I have to show as a tracking engineer, mixing engineer, and producer all in one.

**JS:** Your earlier albums could be considered low fidelity and despite a cleaner sound, *Portrait* maintains some of the same lo-fi influences--was it intentional or just a byproduct of your methodical style?

**HF:** The fidelity is a result of being poor, having little money for gear, and working with what I have. My preamps are noisy and sound like a cassette tape when I run a microphone through them. As far as instrumentation is considered, all mistakes included are intentional. The deeper I fall into this world of commercial engineering; it all seems like such a farce. I have seen sessions where a drummer plays for 1 bar, and the rest is copy and paste. I've seen people "punching in" a flat bass note, and then lining it up exactly with the guitar entrance. To me, it is much more important to capture the experience of the song, all mistakes included. Everything that I have and will ever record is played straight through. If I mess up on a note 3 minutes in, I may go back and re-record the entire take, or just leave it in.

**JS:** Your voice is as much of an instrument as anything you play; do you feel the tone, pitch, et. al. of your voice is just as important as basic instrumentation in achieving mood and atmosphere?

**HF:** I feel like my voice is my main weapon. It's always the last thing I record; I lay the instrumentation, and rarely have much written vocally. Sometimes I just let it ride and see what comes out, like on "Weighed Down," it was totally improvised. Whatever tones fly out of my mouth just happens in the moment. I've always been drawn to the more minor, offsetting tones.

**JS:** How was the European tour? Any snags? Any good road stories?

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**HF:** It was my first time in Europe and it was amazing. I was with Pink Reason, traveling by train. I snagged a bootleg of The Urinals "Complete Recordings" and a double LP of a live Throbbing Gristle set circa 1979. We weren't on many roads, but I did end up sleeping in a ferry station with a few bums, met "Harry Potter" while at a squat in London, ate pizza in Italy, had a mind altering experience in Berlin, and fell in love with Germany.

**JS:** Is there a difference in how your music received by European audiences?

**HF:** There was such a difference playing in Europe compared to the states. Standing ovations, encores, everything was really well attended. It was obvious, in some countries when the lyrics wouldn't translate, and that was difficult. My music now is lyrically based more than ever before, but somehow the feeling would translate. Touring Europe by foot/train was one of the most physically and mentally challenging tours I have ever been on, but by far the most rewarding, and I hope to get the chance to go back soon.

**JS:** What did you miss most about being in Europe (if anything)?

**HF:** Thing I loved the most about Europe was the awesome great cheap food and drinks! The thing I missed most about America was the English language.