

## Jockstrap

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‘For a long time, I couldn’t make music,’ Taylor Skye tells me over breakfast in an East London café. ‘I was introduced to the composer John Cage at music college, and it just changed my perspective on things.’ He pours a cup of tea from a pot, taking a sip before he continues. ‘You know, lots of John Cage pieces are about listening to the sounds around you rather than making your own music, and I was convinced that was the best way to live your life.’ He puts his fork down and grins. In the background there is the hiss of steam from a coffee machine, the clatter of cutlery against crockery, the low mumble of other people’s chatter and the grinding of wheels from traffic moving on the tarmac outside the open café door.

Taylor Skye is an electronic musician and producer, one half of the duo Jockstrap. I have met with Taylor and his bandmate, vocalist and lyricist, Georgia Ellery, to discuss the release of their debut album, *I Love You Jennifer B*. This eclectic collection combines ethereal vocal and lyrical experimentation with a pop-inflected electronic production that is at once very similar to other things (there are faint traces of something like

Madonna, Skrillex, Lily Allen, the poems of Sylvia Plath, a Pixar movie score), and yet also absolutely nothing like anything you've heard ever before.

This particular style is something the pair have honed to growing acclaim in a series of tracks and EPs since they began their collaboration while studying at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where they took different pathways on the elite and highly selective Bachelor of Music programme, graduating into a pandemic. The different sensibilities nurtured by their disciplinary specialisms (Taylor took electronic and produced music, while Georgia — who is also a member of Black Country, New Road, specialised in jazz violin) create a unique approach to collaborative composition. 'It's like the songs turn out so singular,' Georgia tells me, 'And we knew, while we were working on this album — from having collaborated on our other EPs — we knew what was coming, which was going to be a really eclectic selection of songs, but all linked together by the fact it was me and Taylor collaborating, which creates this thing which is singular.'

Taylor nods. 'Yeah, there's nothing else really to it to be honest. It's just quite simple.'

The pair met at Guildhall, finding mutual admiration in one another's approach and taste after taking a composition class together. They had a shared love of James Blake, and would hang out at the college nightclub, eating sweets and DJing. Georgia had heard some of Taylor's music on clips he would post to Facebook, and eventually sent him a track she'd been working on. herself Taylor was immediately drawn in. 'I thought, "this is really great. I'm going to work on this." And we sent it back and forth a few times and then we immediately started to think about playing live.'

'Yeah,' Georgia nods, finishing her own breakfast as the waitress clears our plates. 'We'd both been in bands growing up, so it felt exciting to then be making this into a band.'

'We lived very close to each other for a bit,' Taylor explains, 'And we decided to get our friends involved in this band we were playing live with, and it all just happened. We were both looking for something. I think we both wanted to start putting stuff out in London, and we had a similar drive. And that was the start of everything.'

'Now,' Georgia says, 'We go mostly to mates' gigs — it's bad really, because you go to music school, and firstly you go to loads of gigs and listen to music that you've never really seen...'

The gigs they'd attend at music college, Taylor tells me, weren't only about accessing new music, but networking and career building too. 'I would go to every single gig I could possibly go to, to try and make it happen. I would bring CDs to every gig I would go to, so I think even then we were going to gigs but for a reason. We loved music. But the main thing I enjoyed was going to club nights honestly.'

'So,' Georgia continues, 'We made a song, which didn't take very long. And somewhere along the line someone had said "make sure you have some visuals for your song, because it will do better." So, we made a music video. Just by ourselves. I directed it – and everyone who was going to be in the band was in the music video. And doing everything for free. We put together this package and released it on You Tube...'

'And this little blog liked it...' Taylor says, 'I think we decided to do a gig at the Old Blue Last at some point around that time. And then we just carried on.'

The songs, Georgia tells me, have always begun for her as deeply personal poems, often reflecting on a particular relationship or person. She writes alone before setting the lyrics to music and sending the track over to Taylor, who adds harmony and intervenes in the composition. For *I Love Jennifer B*, they occasionally worked differently, with Taylor sending over an instrumental to which Georgia would respond through lyrical interventions. 'With Poetry you can enhance the abstractions,' she explains. 'What you make with poetry, what you're trying to say, with harmony you make more of it. You give a line a different meaning with a harmony. So that's what I enjoy, because you can further abstract the words you're trying to say with harmony and melody. That's the same each time, except when it's Taylor sending things over, because then it starts with the harmony, the beat already as it is, so I have to work...and that was a little bit trickier this time, because I had to learn how to do that, to use harmony or use the music in my favour.'

Taylor's approach is instinctive, responding to the tracks his collaborator send through attention to the sound, 'Although I love lyrics, I don't really to listen to lyrics at first when I listen to music. And with Jockstrap music, I often don't pay attention to lyrics. I mean I do, eventually, but to me the

lyrics aren't going to change, that's been done, so I listen to the sound, and just start work immediately. If Georgia's got something in mind specifically, I'll listen to that, but it often works best if we don't talk too much while we're working on it. Because I connect so much with Georgia's music, I feel different things at different points and I just put those in, basically. I have my own influences at the time, and they come out...so that's it really, sometimes it's done within one session of making it, sometimes it takes ages to do it. For me it's a sound focussed thing because that's a huge part of music in general.'

'Taylor's production is very emotional,' Georgia tells me, 'and that gives me something to hook onto. Especially ones where he has begun the track, there's' this feeling, which happens in music that I really like...we can change up the structure if something happens lyrically, if a lyric doesn't fit, or we run out of lyrics. For one album track, Taylor sent over the beat which didn't have any harmony in it all, the harmony comes in halfway through, but listening to that by itself, it's very dark and you can hear it. I wanted to put a hook which is a spoken shouty thing, which is just visceral, that lifts it, so that was a way in which I could use the harmony to change and make decisions about the album sound.' Partly, she says, the eclectic nature of the album is driven by the divergences in their music sensibilities.

‘We wouldn’t ever sit down and listen to an album. We’ll be into our own stuff at different points and that’s usually when the cool fusions happen is when I’m into one thing and Taylor’s into something completely different and they merge.’

But before we get to the album, let’s rewind, because it’s clear, as the pair chatter over the cacophony of the café about their approach to music, that the singular sounds they create together are also the product of singular and in some respects unusual childhood influences and musical experiences. Georgia was raised in Cornwall, and, having been gifted a violin for her fifth birthday, began classical training. She found the classical approach to music uninspiring — practicing alone was a slog, and solo recitals left her feeling exposed.

‘And then I got into some orchestras, into some string orchestras, and I really enjoyed that. There was the collaborative aspect, making music with people. As soon as there was someone else playing duet with me, I really enjoyed that. And then when I was a little bit older, I started going to raves, and I loved it. I discovered dance music. My dad had quite good taste, he played dance music in the car, so that was like, British 90s trip hop and sort of like rave music. That’s where that came from. But my mum played lots of

Irish music. We went to Womad every year, so I listened to lots of different music. I was interested in music from all over. I had broad musical taste. And then I decided I wanted to go to jazz school. So, I listened to lots of jazz music for a year. I didn't have any lessons or anything like that, I was copying, which is what you do in jazz anyway. That's how you learn: you listen.'

Violin was, she admits was an unusual choice of jazz instrument, but enabled a certain amount of experimentation. 'I mean it's a beautiful instrument classically,' she laughs, 'So feathery and lush. But paired with drums it struggles, and bass, and as a solo line instrument. I think I grappled with the sound of it, I tried it really electronic, I tried it with pedals, but really what worked was playing with a line-up of other string instruments and playing music it suited a bit more, so like Afro-Cuban music it works really well with, Brazilian music, a violin works well in a jazz café setting as well. But not straight up bebop.'

Taylor meanwhile came to composition through music theatre. His parents were West End performers, 'They were in *Phantom of the Opera*, *Miss Saigon*, all the Andrew Lloyd-Webber things. My dad did a stint of the roller-skate one... *Starlight Express*, toured to Germany.' Taylor played



classical piano as a child, but, like Georgia ,didn't particularly enjoy the process of classical tuition. 'And then I went to see Stevie Wonder. He was the first artist I ever saw live. My dad bought tickets for me and him to go and see him in London, and that changed my perception.'

Music became an all-consuming pastime at that point — and when he was gifted a second-hand mac computer by his father, Taylor began working on composition for hours each day. 'Before that I was playing Call of Duty and stuff, but I stopped doing that – literally overnight. I'd go to these garage band workshops at the Apple Store ...that was around 2009 or 10. And around then is when I started listen to dubstep. I was about 11 or 12, so I couldn't go and see that music, but there were just certain songs — like, 'Cracks', a Flux Pavilion remix. It just made me want to start making music and spend the next few years just learning how to produce. And I had these monikers, these dubstep monikers that I took really seriously, playing these gigs around Leicester. I recently went back to the dubstep...I think it's very moving, and it's how I learned how to make music. The producers who make that are so talented, they produce, mix, write, everything, and it sounds really, really intense, so it's a really good way to learn how to make music. And recently, I've just been into song writing, so it's quite a strange thing to be in...but both of us, Georgia and I, those things have always been

our lives. My dad, I'm just turning into my dad basically. He was such a big Bob Dylan fan, and I just wasn't interested then — but my parents have really influenced my music taste now. And they were so supportive of the music I liked. My mum would drive me down to Angel to go and see Flux Pavillion at the O2. My dad bought me the James Blake album. Just lots of really great memories.'

*I Love Jennifer B*, like the duo's earlier music, spans a range of influences that encompass their personal music histories. The pair worked at this debut for two years, signing with Rough Trade some way through the process. The album deal feels like something of a full circle for the Jockstrap project. The A&R at Rough Trade was the first person in the music industry who had ever approached the pair to discuss music 'So it's nice to come back around to them...' Taylor says, 'Our manager was just doing what everybody does, which is sending stuff out to different people. And Rough Trade were the last people we sent the music to, I don't know why. They really liked the music when we played it to them, it was quite simple really. You've just got to go where your gut it is.'

The sound aesthetic of *Jennifer B* channels the theatrical energy of music theatre combined with the improvisational spirit of jazz, and this is

reflected in the visual and atmospheric language of the music video for 'Concrete Over Water'. This whimsical, harlequin inspired production, for which Georgia worked closely with director Eddie Whelan to create a holistic world populated by complex and carefully drawn characters, epitomises the distinct style for which the duo are becoming recognised. Unlike much recent music, the album appears unaffected by the specific conditions of the pandemic and the myriad wider socio-political disasters, and deeply rooted in form and emotion, in a way that manifests as timeless.

'I think we would have made this no matter what,' Tyler tells me, 'I don't think [the pandemic] changed the music we've written. I'm not that, personally, motivated by specific things in the world, especially with music. Obviously, everything affects your music so I don't have much of a choice, because it will do. But although during the whole process we were dealing with that, we weren't really...it just sounds like what I thought it would sound like. It just took a bit longer, because things took a bit longer.'

'We'd never done anything so long...so I found that was a challenge,' Georgia adds, 'Trying to hold all the songs in my head at the same time. I was determined to have a concept at the beginning.'

'I'm less into that,' Tyler says, 'Georgia's more into that so we had to compromise. We had different things we wanted from the album. I'm less fussed. When I listen to music, I listen to it in the moment, I don't think about context too much. And we didn't want that. We wanted a bangers sort of thing — I mean,' he laughs, 'We haven't done that either.'

Perhaps the whimsical solemnity of some of the album tracks comes from the isolated manner of their collaboration, and its concurrent intensity. I do wonder how this duo, at the cusp of adulthood, have managed to navigate an intense and sometimes lonely collaboration with any semblance of social life.

'We feel like we're working all the time,' the pair say in unison, when I ask about how they manage to juggle an all-consuming collaboration, other music projects and a personal life.

'We've got quite a good work ethic,' Georgia says, 'Music is our social life, our personal life, everything. Obviously, you know when you're working and not, but we feel like we're working a lot at the moment.'

Taylor shrugs, 'It's pretty half and half. Isolating when you're not on tour and exposing when you're on tour. That's how I feel. We don't see many people when we write music. And I do it in my bedroom as well so it's very much...cool.'

I wonder if there's a temptation to let loose and party now that the hard work of the album is over, and with a tour spanning the UK, Europe and US on the horizon. Then again, maybe the pitfalls of rock and roll excess aren't all that luring for musicians genuinely driven by the music, and raised in the self-care generation.

'We're quite sensible people,' Taylor says, 'We're both quite good at being aware of taking care of ourselves. We got massaged...we have steam rooms. It's almost like music — it's not a choice really. We've been like this since we met each other. We just need this to survive sort of thing. We don't really drink that much on tour. It's not anything weak, it's just that we're into taking care of ourselves.'

Georgia sinks back in her chair, 'I figured out really early on that I couldn't handle it in the way I thought I would on tour. And I was really, landed in a

mess if I did...and it's a job. Very quickly I was like, 'alcohol backstage? This is a job!' So...it's a lot more sustainable and enjoyable now.'

The light changes outside and we head into the street. 'I can see why you'd do it,' Taylor says, of the temptations to go wild. 'I felt that on the last tour. I found it very difficult to relax after each gig. And I could feel how a little something,.. I mean I've never taken drugs, so I don't even know what that's like, but I understand it and empathise with people who do it. There's a reason why it's happened forever.'