

I met Omar in 1994 while he was traversing the country like something of a punk rock nomad. In the years preceding cell phones and email, the lure of the camaraderie and adventure a life hitchhiking and jumping trains offered was too great for many kids to resist. Anyone with a copy of *Maximumrocknroll* was plugged into not only a monthly who's-who of bands and record labels, but an entire global culture and community of likeminded outcasts that remained virtually invisible until punk was once again neutered by the mainstream. This was the world of all ages shows and *do it yourself* mentality that we'd begun gravitating to in high school, though it never occurred to me to start a band (or even play music) until after school was a memory. Omar, on the other hand, emerging from a family of musicians, had ten bands under his belt by the time he split El Paso when he was seventeen. At that point, he embarked on a lonely year of total anonymity, traipsing around the U.S. on an adventure rife with highs and lows, good luck and bad, buoyed by the limitless optimism (and, let's be honest, cheap drugs) that thrived back then. From People's Park to ABC No Rio, he lived a lifetime's worth of adventure and adversity, discovering himself in the process. That he could have submerged himself in anything as passive as simply traveling and observing seems almost inconceivable now. The proverbial quiet before the storm, you might say.

Our paths crossed midway through that adventure, a mutual friend bringing him to a show my band, Angel Hair, was playing in Boulder, Colorado, my hometown at the time. I remember Omar being quiet and, well, kind of anonymous, but with a kind smile and a rare sort of sincerity in his carefully chosen words. Somehow, he seemed older and wiser than his seventeen years. We wouldn't really get to know each other well for another five or six years, but that night we recognized something familiar in one another and the seed of our friendship took root. I'm sure that at first I never would have imagined seeing him again - that was simply the vagrant nature of so many punk-based friendships, at least in Boulder. People drifted in and out all the time...

Eventually, his *walkabout* delivered him back to El Paso where a slot in the local college rock band, At the Drive-In, awaited him. His presence rebooted the group, repositioning its focus on hardcore, embracing the influence of bands such as Rites of Spring and yes, even my own (something which Omar has since insisted was the case). On the heels of virtually endless touring, ATDI became hugely successful and seemed poised for genuine mainstream appeal. Omar's vision for their sound, however, was never unanimously embraced by the rest of the group, and frictions arose. These would eventually drive a wedge between the members, forcing Omar to defect at the peak of the band's success in early 2001. Forming a pact with his best friend of ten years, singer/lyricist Cedric Bixler Zavala, the two made headlines by openly denouncing the direction ATDI was headed in, and vowing to recommit themselves to the ideals with which they'd begun making music. Retreating to their adopted home of Long Beach, California, the pair stretched their legs out with the low-pressure dub band, De Facto, a project that had begun years before in El Paso with longtime collaborator, Jeremy Ward. Within months, though, they'd introduced The Mars Volta and Omar wasted no time in beginning to conjure a musical universe entirely of his own vision.

Not limited to the realms of this very one-of-a-kind band, however, his impossibly prolific way of doing things has also resulted in countless collaborations during the past ten years. Soundtracks, live albums, projects enlisting contributions from legendary artists of all stripes... All of which, he's apt to insist, constituting a single body of work. Dismissing the concept of "solo" projects, Omar instead views the various configurations of his non-Volta vehicles as simply opportunities to experience "the process" with some new faces. For him, the medium is the message, a therapeutic exercise for which the finished product borders on irrelevant. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that he's effectively rewritten the rule book on what an artist, or even a band, is and what an audience can (or maybe *should*) expect. I imagine I'm not the only person who knew him early in his career who's stood by dumbfounded by his sheer tirelessness and the limitless depth of his creativity. He is unlike anyone else I know. I consider myself a motivated perfectionist but I still feel like a slouch in his company.

I once asked him why he works the way he does, and what the point was to doing what seemed like as many records as possible, as quickly as possible, year in and year out. He thought about it for just a second and then told me as matter-of-factly as ever, that he believed that somewhere, in some alternate reality or universe, each of these songs was a living person he imagined one day getting the chance to meet. It was far from what I expected him to say, and I admired the beauty and simplicity of his answer. Each successive album dreams a world into existence somewhere? In my opinion, it's as conceivable as anything else. After all, it seems to me as though channeling the knowledge gleaned from metaphysical experiences into sound and vision has been central to Omar's purpose all along, and these concepts seem to go hand-in-hand. Keep in mind, this is a guy raised on family meditation, weekly fasting and devout vegetarianism, not exactly a suburban kind of environment. Could the motivation be anything *less* than otherworldly? I mean, how else can we comprehend the motives of an artist who literally never stops recording, and rarely (if ever) pauses to even survey the landscape of his creation...

Regardless, one thing is undeniable. Omar absolutely lives for the process and the ritual and the exercise of creation as much as any esoteric or philosophical purpose. The same can be said for his nascent career in filmmaking (while the inexhaustible utility of that hitchhiking odyssey as creative inspiration cannot be understated). I've always imagined at least part of his motivation is a passive way of making light of the utter laziness and lack of purpose of the idle masses of professional rock musicians, eking out their so-called masterpieces at three-year intervals. It's as though his whole career is an exercise in pulling back the curtain on everyone else. "Relentless" hardly does him justice. Not only will he never take no for an answer, he'll erect a 100-foot neon sign spelling out "Y-E-S" opposite your front door and charge you admission to view it. He is the master of his domain and awaits a green light from nobody. It's easy to get swept up in the momentum of his passion for the collaborative process. It's equally easy, I might add, to succumb to the frustration of his ten-places-at-once, oblivious-to-deadlines approach, the inevitable yin to his yang. Ultimately, though, we're better off for the opportunity to play a role in his schemes, and he'd be the first to admit that he thrives not only on chaos, but on the energy reflected back at him by his bandmates and film crews, by Cedric and

Ximena, by Juan, Lars, Adam, Rizzi, Ramon, Cathy... Christ, almost thirty album covers later and I'm as enthusiastic as ever. For me, there's something Zen-like about the repetitive nature and challenge of creating art for Omar, itself a privilege for which my gratitude is profound. Every day is a challenge, and every day comes with a reward. I'm aware that this is an enviable position to be in.

Sometimes I feel like I could type the words *An Omar Rodriguez Lopez Production...* in my sleep. He would probably like that since it would potentially double my productivity.

Sonny Kay
Los Angeles, CA
January 2011