

[00:00:00]

**John Moe:** A note to our listeners, this episode contains discussions of suicide.

**Music:** “Fireflies” from the album *Flying Wig* by Devendra Banhart, a cheerful, upbeat track.

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

**John Moe:** That's Devendra Banhart's song, “Fireflies”, off his latest album, *Flying Wig*—which is Devendra's 11th full-length album in a career that goes back more than two decades. Devendra is a singer, songwriter, also a painter—a visual artist. Wikipedia lists his musical genres as freak folk, psychedelic folk, and new weird America. I really love his music; a lot of people do. And I want to get into this interview as soon as I can. We talk about music, about the cruel voices inside ourselves, about family. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Well, thanks for doing the show. Have you—I don't suppose you've heard the show before.

**Devendra Banhart:** Well, it's quite presumptuous of you.

**John Moe:** I know.

**Devendra Banhart:** I, in fact, have heard the show.

**John Moe:** Have you? Oh, good!

**Devendra Banhart:** But I feel the same way. I don't suppose you've ever heard my music.

**John Moe:** I have heard your music. So, now we're both well informed.

**Devendra Banhart:** *(Chuckles.)* I have heard the show. And in fact, I kept kind of pushing this. Not—for three reasons. Three reasons. And one of them is that I wanted to listen to as many episodes as I could. And I just didn't have a chance to like listen to all of them. In fact, I've really only gotten a moment to hear two episodes. And the two episodes I've heard are the first one, with Patton. Which was so—I was weeping from the first utterance that it got me. It just got me. From your voice! Your voice is so incredible. You have such a wonderful voice.

**John Moe:** How kind. Thank you.

**Devendra Banhart:** It's like a real gift that you've been given, this voice that is so comforting and familial and compassionate and inviting and inclusive and has this—the most beautiful like expression of, you know, some kind of—*(sighs)* I guess a teacher-y kind of thing, some kind of sagely kind of voice that's—just something trustworthy, I guess, about your voice. Which I feel it in a very physical way, where I go, “Oh, wow, I can relax and calm into this. I can really—” Yeah, it's so nice.

So, that was immediate. And then of course, the episode is so beautiful and so much wisdom is imparted and so much vulnerability is shared and humor. You know, and it's so important. And you talk about how important humor is a part of grief and depression. And then I heard—and then, of course, I went to the one about sad music.

**John Moe:** Oh, right. Recent episode.

**Devendra Banhart:** And I found all those songs to be really horrible choices. (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Oh, really?

**Devendra Banhart:** Except for—no, I'm just kidding. I'm kidding. A few I was like, okay, but come on. (*Laughs.*) Sorry, I'm being such a bitch. Okay, yeah, it was a great episode.

**John Moe:** Thank you. And I should add—Devendra Banhart, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

**Devendra Banhart:** (*Cackles.*) And the title! This is the best name for a podcast. I couldn't resist. I saw that. I said, of course, I'm in. I love the name.

**John Moe:** It's the one that made my wife laugh the most. So, that's the one that I felt that we had to go with.

**Devendra Banhart:** On that episode about music, did you have a list? I don't recall that being a part of it.

**John Moe:** Did I have a list of my own?

(*Devendra confirms.*)

No, I was mostly there to ask questions.

**Devendra Banhart:** So, what is your list? That's what I was wondering the whole episode! Is it going to get to a point where you go, “Okay, here's mine.”

**John Moe:** Well, at the very end, I mentioned some Tom Waits music off of *Frank's Wild Years* and *Bone Machine* as having a lot of a lot of good, resonant, energetic darkness to it.

**Devendra Banhart:** Good choice, good choice. Ooh, yeah. That's—wow, perfectly played. That's a good answer.

**John Moe:** How about you, with the latest album, with *Flying Wig*? Do you see that as music about depression? Music about sadness? About darkness?

**Devendra Banhart:** Sure. (*Chuckles.*) I do. I do.

[00:05:00]

I feel like that's a space that I just never don't live in. I feel like things get really sticky and hairy and kind of—you know, things get dangerous maybe for me when I try to pretend like that isn't just something I live with and that I just live in and with and I have to figure out how to really make friends with or dance with. It's the best way of putting it. And it feels like that. So, the record is going to be about that, just like I think all my records are about that. And maybe the earlier ones were a little more—things were—I suppose I was using metaphors and symbols and surrealism to sing about that anyways. But it's always kind of been the same thing. It's just this why do I write songs? And what are they beyond just what's interesting to me at that moment or what I'm experiencing and living at that moment? What are they beyond that? Because they're definitely that. Each record is kind of this little portrait of where I'm at, at the moment—or what I can't even deal with at the moment.

That's one of the weird, magical things about a song. Nine months later, you'll go, “That's what that was about.” I was—it was like—it's almost like my subconsciousness was protecting me from something I couldn't process at that moment that I wasn't prepared to analyze. So, it came out as a song, and then I had to kind of deal with it in my waking life. And then nine months later, I go, “That's what that song was about.” That's always a really interesting, magical thing when that happens. And it feels really collaborative. But beyond what is—beyond why am I writing songs, just to explain what's going on at the moment, I think it has to be because it's the closest I can get to showing someone what I'm like when no one is around.

Which is the way I want to be seen by anyone, especially by the people I love. I want them to know what I'm like when no one's around. That's somehow—that feels like the seed of one of the—of some kind of the logic behind this need to write songs and dedicate my life to it. And then also, because I was born with this longing. It's like a longing that I know I was born with. And the longing, a longing to have community, a longing to live in a world where I'm communing with other people but also with unseen beings. You know, I really long for this communion with just a family of existence. I don't know exactly how to put it. I don't know how to put it exactly.

**John Moe:** Is it—you mentioned that you have this darkness that you have to try to figure out how to dance with. And you mentioned this longing that you have. How conscious is the songwriting in an effort to address those things? Like, do you sit down and say, “Okay, I'm going to make a plan. I'm going to go from point—here's the flow chart. I'm going to go from point A to point B,” or is it just a kind of going with the waves of thought?

**Devendra Banhart:** Hm. I think it's a bit of all those things. I'm filling up—like, I can't imagine going out and not trying to find lyrics in the world. So, I went on vacation one time. I tried to go on vacation one time. Like, I'm on vacation, classic vacation. (*Chuckles.*) And it was five days in like Holbox, this island off of somewhere in Mexico. And I had a nice-looking hotel; it won an award. This whole thing. I want to go on vacation! And it lasted three days. That was—I lasted three days when this attempt to do this thing called a vacation—and it made me—because it just was torture! It made no sense to me. It's not how I enjoy anything. I love that I'm going to leave the house with a pen and paper, and I'm going to go looking for lyrics. (*Chuckles.*)

And it's the same thing why I have a camera on me too, because it helps kind of keep me awake and present. And what's something worth capturing? And then I don't take a photo of it. I just write down what that thing was. And so, that's kind of a lot of collecting. There's—that's that one part of the process. But then, this is such an—it's an exterior thing. This is like dealing with the exterior world, but it's totally tied to what's going on inside of me. And of course, how I perceive the world is how the world is to me. And that's a—you know, that's always like—that's a miraculous thing and a terrifying thing. It puts a lot of responsibility on us as people, right? On me.

[00:10:00]

It's up to me. Woah. But also, how wonderful! It's up to me, you know? And this dark thing. This dark thing, this—I don't know how to describe it. Is it just a cruel ego? Is it just a cruel critic in my mind? Is it just some karma that I have, that I've been born with either this horribly cruel voice that will manifest at the weirdest time or—slash this strange desire for like this oblivion, void, nothingness that isn't really like that. It isn't really like that. It's more like I am that oblivion nothingness, and I will look at myself that way. It's unbelievable. It's this rain of criticism that—

The only thing I've found that could—nothing makes it go away. All I've been able to do is find some distance or some space between me and it, so I don't fully believe it. And I've managed to smile at it. Which is very difficult, because the first impulse is believe it. I'll be—I just—I'm late for this conversation that I've been really looking forward to. I didn't want to talk so much already. I'm sorry. I want to talk to you. I want to ask you questions.

*(John chuckles.)*

But I'm really jet lagged. And so, I kind of—I came late, because I tried to run. But I'm running, and it feels good to run. I'm sweating things out. I'm smelling. I just try to listen. The birds, the breeze running through feels so nice. And then suddenly this voice. “You're a fucking loser. You're a fucking loser!” It's so—and the voice is almost gentle, because it's just saying it like, “There you are.” And that's even more cruel, of course. I imagine the voice would be like—the horrible like, “Yeah, fuck it!” No, it's just—it's even more cruel in that it's gentle. And I can hear it. And the first thought is—it's just, “Oh, wow, you're right. And that hurts.” And then before it becomes like this seed in this soil in my soul, before it buries itself into me, to my mind and heart, I can kind of look at it as a child and just smile at it and be patient with it. Or look at it as, “Hey, I'm finally an adult, which means that I can smile at you, which means that I can love you, which means that I can—hey, okay, okay.” But I'm going to continue to enjoy this run. That of course is going to be a part of songwriting.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. Do you ever kind of turn the tables on that voice and think about, you know, if that voice was being spoken to a child—to a, you know, seven-year-old—you know, what would you say to a seven-year-old who's hearing that voice? You know, I'm sure you'd go comfort him. You'd say, “No, things are going to be okay. Things are—”

**Devendra Banhart:** I remember hearing—yeah, of course. I mean, of course. And it is how, you know, that voice—ugh, so cruel, so cruel. When does that voice begin, you know?

**John Moe:** When did it begin with you?

**Devendra Banhart:** I mean, it began with me with losing trust in my—in the first gods, in my parents.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** More about those first gods in just a moment.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thoughtful acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back with musician Devendra Banhart, who's opening up about his childhood.

**Devendra Banhart:** You know, our first gods—wow, there they are, huge. And we're totally reliant upon them. And that trust broke for me when I was two years old. And I even—I mean, I remember it.

**John Moe:** What happened?

**Devendra Banhart:** My biological father came home, and he was just—and I was two. I mean, maybe even younger. And I didn't—couldn't even speak. But crawling around, and he was just so drunk. And he threw me on the bed and just kind of pinned me down and just kind of stood there slobbering. And I could feel like saliva falling on my face. And he was saying, you know, mean words. And I didn't know—I had no idea what the words meant. But I saw them as these black balls coming out of his mouth and just hitting me on the face. At that age, you know, you're just so attuned to energy and vibrations. And at that moment, from then on—you know, he might have apologized a lot after that and changed his ways.

[00:15:00]

I don't know. But what was severed in me was this trust. That was it. And I didn't think, "Oh, I'm a horrible—I must have done a bad thing." I was too young to have that concept. It was just, "Oh, I don't trust these giant people." *(Chuckles.)* And then and then he went to jail for something else. He was a drug dealer. He went to jail really soon after. And so, I never really—you know, I barely knew him. And I feel like that—and so, that was really severed early on. And I remembered that when I was 18, and I used that as an excuse to be cruel to myself, to really, really be as—you know, to really be a victim. I really did. I really kind of went into that victim mode and like woe is me. Because I remembered that that had happened. I didn't remember it until I was 18.

And then, over time, I realized, wow. It never even occurred to me the pain that he was in. It never occurred to me that he was hearing that voice, the same voice that I've learned to kind of be gentle with and to not—and to let pass by like a cloud while I'm running, to this day.

Like, earlier, as in like 15 minutes ago. But he was—you know, he was hearing that voice, and he was suffering so much. I'd never even considered that.

**John Moe:** So, he took it out on you, and then you grew up, and then you took it out on you.

**Devendra Banhart:** I definitely took it out on me, and I felt justified to do so. And then I realized the pain that he must have been in to do that to his—to a baby. And then, about six years ago, he killed himself. He killed himself on Halloween.

**John Moe:** I'm so sorry.

**Devendra Banhart:** And it was like, wow, okay. This is the ultimate no. I think Eckhart Tolle calls suicide the ultimate no to life. The ultimate no. And that was—yeah, it was like, okay. He took it out on himself.

**John Moe:** Who was he to you in the intervening years between that incident when you were a baby and later in life?

**Devendra Banhart:** A distant biological father. I never called him dad. And I visited him one time when I was about 12 years old. And then after that it was—through the years, I maybe talked to him a little bit. And then he started to do the drunken phone call in my mid-20s—late 20s, the drunken phone call that said, “I'm done. I can't take this world anymore. I'm so sorry,” and hanging up. And then, you know, you call, and you call, and you don't hear from him. And you're calling his wife, and she hasn't heard from him. And that happened like five times. And then eventually you get the call that he really went through with it.

And I think you've talked about—I think it was your brother that took his life.

*(John confirms.)*

It had to do with addiction, you'd say, or the stigma of addiction?

**John Moe:** It had to do with addiction, and it had to do with shame. He was a—he had a substance use disorder. He had, you know, the mental illness known as substance use disorder. And he got straight, volunteered on a Narcotics Anonymous hotline, was able to talk a lot of people down to their value, to talk to people and say, “No, this is what you're feeling. This is the value you actually have. This is why a lot of people want you to stick around.” And I will say he was able to apply that to everybody but himself.

And when he—when the depression emerged from the addiction, which often happens with addiction, he felt like he had done something wrong. He felt like he was letting everybody down by having the heart and the mind that he had. And then on a very bad day, that's what took him from us.

**Devendra Banhart:** Ugh. That's so painful. That's so painful.

**John Moe:** Yeah, well, that's why I want to keep talking about this stuff.

**Devendra Banhart:** Yeah. I mean, (*stammering*) I feel like one of the things in that first episode that you did, Patton Oswalt talks about how dangerous it is that what's considered—and it is, at that moment—such a powerful scene in film, in the *Good Will Hunting* scene where he's like, “It's not your fault. It's not your fault.”

[00:20:00]

And he's trembling and crying, and then he hugs him, and then it's like, “Okay, you're good to go.” Like, that scene itself is powerful. (*Chuckles.*) But he's right. I mean, that's actually the beginning of therapy. Okay, now we can begin.

**John Moe:** Yeah. We need to see you tomorrow. And every day this week.

**Devendra Banhart:** Yeah, exactly. And—but the way it presents it is, “Okay. Oh, you had a good cry, and you did it, and you realize, okay. Then you're good.” And it's just, you know, not how it is. This thing doesn't kind of go away. You just learn how to dance with this. It's like this delusion that we're going to have—we're going to do anything enough, and there won't be mistakes, and there won't be just conflicts. There won't be like a problem. There won't be just emotions anymore. Like, this thing that—basically, they won't be suffering.

Like, there's this weird, bizarre idea that there's a certain amount of things that you can do and things you can buy and ways that you can build your world and ways that you can look, and you won't suffer. And it's a good parent who wants their child to not suffer and make sure they don't suffer at all. Like, this is just—but it's just so impossible. It's so not real, so not realistic.

**John Moe:** Well, the pain is such that you look past the idea that there won't be suffering, but there won't be not suffering either. There just won't be anything. There will be no feeling of relief. There'll just be nothingness. And I've always struggled with that, the kind of paradox of, yeah, if you go ahead and cut out early, you're not going to feel better, because you just won't feel anything. And it was explained to me, from people who've been there that, yes, but the pain is so unbearable that it overcomes that paradox. The illness—the thinking is so dangerous and so strong that it looks past that.

**Devendra Banhart:** Yeah, and I—yeah. When I was a little kid, I used to think—when I first heard about suicide, I was 14/13. The idea. I was in Venezuela. I don't know if I was in school or something, but this—hey, this is what suicide is. It's somebody—maybe they jump off a building, and they kill themselves. And my first thought was, “Wow, well, that seems pretty cool to make the decision—” This was really my first thought. “Make the decision. So, you're going to kill yourself. Okay. So, you know what I would do? I would just, like a week before, do everything I ever wanted to do! I'd walk around naked and like steal whatever I wanted, I guess, and, you know, walk up to people and say what I thought about them and just have fun and go skateboarding all day. Play video games. I'd play video games all day. I would just have so much fun, and then I would do it.”

Like, that really was my first thought. Like, oh, I guess you get a—I guess you get to really have fun before it happens.

(John “wow”s.)

And that's—I don't know. I wonder if some people still think that it's something like that. Because rarely do we just immediately consider that when somebody takes their own life, they are in unimaginable pain. Unimaginable pain.

**John Moe:** How long ago did you lose your dad? Your biological father, excuse me. \

**Devendra Banhart:** Six years ago.

**John Moe:** Six years ago.

**Devendra Banhart:** Six years ago. And—

**John Moe:** What are you still carrying from that?

**Devendra Banhart:** Well, I feel like I had more of a relationship with him today than I did when he was alive. Meaning that he lives with me in a way that—like, when somebody dies—before they die, they're in this one location on Earth. He was in Texas. He's a Texas guy. I was born in Texas. You know, he's a Texas guy, and he's there. He doesn't travel. He didn't travel. I mean, I never heard him leave the block that he lived in Houston since I knew him. He's just there. Then he dies. And I have no... I have no—I can't go to him. I can't go to him and physically talk to him and see him and say, “I forgive you. And I love you. And I know you loved me.” I can't say that.

But he no longer is in this one specific place on Earth. He suddenly is—he's here in my house now. He's in my—when I look in the mirror, I see him. I definitely see him. You know, he's such a part of my every moment now, and my consciousness, in a way that he wasn't before.

[00:25:00]

So, that—there's a closer-ness now. And yeah.

**John Moe:** How do you feel about that?

**Devendra Banhart:** Well, I only—(*stammering*) it basically leaves it up to me to have a sense of love and compassion for him and to have a sense that there's this—(*chuckles*) you know, his ghost is my friend or is something that I welcome in and that I am tender with and that I can even—even, you know, this whole idea of talk to your ancestors. You know, or listen to your ancestors. Those are two different things. And they're two different kind of attitudes or kind of—it's like this ritualistic or ceremonial normal day consciousness activity. And one is talk to your ancestors, and I'm including him obviously in there, or listen to your



ancestors. And talk to your ancestors... they just both look really different, and he's a part of that.

And I don't know if there is—you know, is there some disembodied consciousness floating around my room right now? And—oh, and I'm listening. Oh, what are you trying to tell me? I mean, I don't know if that's true or not. I'm basically like a really intense believer exactly as much as I am a skeptic.

**John Moe:** 50/50?

**Devendra Banhart:** I'm really—not even, whatever is 100 at the same time.

*(They chuckle.)*

And so—I don't know, but a part of me feels like I'm going to even use that to listen, to just listen. In my life, I want to listen. That's what I—same thing with walking around with a camera; walking around with a pen and paper is a way of listening and observing. And I can say it was Gary trying to say, “Hey, check that out, notice that in yourself or out there.” Or I can say it was, you know, just me using that to notice something that's going to be worth writing down. And talk to your ancestors is totally—is really interesting, because that's a very irrational activity but totally healthy, because it falls under ritual. Which of course the world we live in thinks is total bullshit.

But we, as humans, long for ritual. Ritual is such an important part of our—you know, of our mental health. Ritual is a big part of it. So, ironically, I might look insane. No one's here. And I go like this, “Faye—” Which is my grandmother's name. I go, “Faye, como estas?” Like, I could just say, “Faye, you know, te piensan de ti?” I could just send her something. I'm just talking to my grandmother! I'm just talking out loud to my dead grandmother. And that to me is a very healthy thing. You know, it's a very healthy activity that I did in that day. At the end of the day, I can go, what did I do? Oh, cool. I spoke to Faye.

**John Moe:** Is that in your songs, too?

**Devendra Banhart:** That word is in my songs. It means faith. Her name was Faith.

**John Moe:** Right, but is the idea of kind of processing these people and—I don't know how I feel about “processing”, because it always implies an end to it, which I'm not so sure belongs there. But the idea of having these people around and making sense of your world and making sense of your darkness and addressing the voice that we talked about, that critical voice. Does—is the song—are the songs that you make a kind of catharsis as a kind of like a response?

**Devendra Banhart:** I don't know. I don't know if the song—I don't know if I'm turning to the song for catharsis. I do hope the song is itself cathartic, meaning all the work I do goes into the song. So, I can't—I'm not talking to you about it in a way I'm happy with, and I'll be happy with. Like, I'm embarrassed. From the minute I started talking to you, I've been embarrassed. Because I don't have—I have no wisdom! I have nothing like pithy and kind of

like, wow, here's a little soundbite that is just so wise and cutting and I've learned anything! I don't know; I just really feel totally—yeah, I don't feel like I can give anything in this context. In the context of sitting and working and working on the line, that I feel like I can give.

**John Moe:** You should know that I did message on Slack our producer during this interview, and I said, “Wow, this is a good interview.” So, I think you're doing great with the interview.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:30:00]

Back with Devendra Banhart after the break.

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** I'm talking with musician Devendra Banhart about—oh boy, lots of things, including music and catharsis.

**Devendra Banhart:** Now, I do get catharsis from songs. That's a thing, too. I turn to music for the thing that I don't know if I turn to writing songs—

**John Moe:** Other people's songs.

**Devendra Banhart:** I don't really turn to writing songs. I turn to writing songs much more to honor something, much more as something to give, much more as something to share. And I work on that thing to share just like—you know, it's just something that you cultivate until it grows into something that can grow on its own or live on its own or tells you it's done. You kind of work on the thing until it says, “Hey, I'm done.” Which isn't always the—which is actually never the case, also at the same time. There's no—art never says, “I'm done.” And even within songs. So, you'll go on tour, and then you'll be playing the song, and you go, “Oh, fuck, that was the right word. That was the word I wanted to say!” Basically, what's going to happen with our conversation.

You know, I really respect you. I really like what you do, and I really think it's so important. And you've really made a space where people can talk about something that the world doesn't want you to talk about, but it wants to hear about. Everybody wants to hear that they're not alone. Everybody wants to hear that they have those thoughts, that someone else has those same thoughts. Everybody. And so that's like water on the fucking desert. And to make a specific space for that is real like Bodhisattva activity. So, I'm so—I really respect what you do.

**John Moe:** Well, thank you.

**Devendra Banhart:** But I shouldn't be on this at all! I should just be writing a song. That's what I do.

*(John laughs.)*

That's what I do! *(Chuckles.)* But what I will—so, what I will do—that's what my work is, right? But what I will do is, is I will turn to a song. And that's why even sad songs are so exciting. And I understand that you can—at the rest of the podcast, it was quite synonymous. You know, depressing songs, sad songs, you can say it's the same thing. I get it, without judging. But what I mean is that the first guest, you really made that distinction between a sad song and a depressing song. And most bad songs are depressing, but great songs can be sad. I thought that's so—yeah, it's great and beautiful. And I so agree with that.

And I'll turn to these sad songs the same way that maybe someone might be excited to go to like the world's biggest roller coaster or something or an escape room or go bungee jumping or something. You know, like I'm going to go on a ride where I'm going to be moved. I'm going to—and so these things—a roller coaster, you're physically like, “Aah!” And the wind and, ooh, it's such a rush! It's a high. A sad song will take me to that place. And I'll just weep and weep. And it's a miraculous thing. Think about how powerful that is.

**John Moe:** What are some songs that you turn to for those adventures?

**Devendra Banhart:** Well, wow. I mean, it's a long list.

*(John affirms.)*

When you ask me, immediately—obviously—

**John Moe:** Recently. Let's go with recently.

**Devendra Banhart:** Recently. Obviously, you know, “Who Let the Dogs Out”, “Gangnam Style”.

*(John laughs.)*

You know, the classics.

**John Moe:** “Happy Birthday”. Yeah.

**Devendra Banhart:** Those are the only two, actually. “Happy Birthday”. I mean, just give me a noose when you—*(mumbles)*. But you know, you said something on that thing—on that episode too, which is quite beautiful. Which is finding these excruciating lyrics hidden in these pop songs. So, “my loneliness is killing me” in “Hit Me, Baby—” also, “hit me, baby, one more time”. Like, you'd never—you don't even think about that. Because it's just—she's doing, and she's seducing you and doing her cool thing, and looking at the camera. But she's saying, “My loneliness is killing me.” It's so beautiful! I mean, that's the best. And that's like a real Trojan horse, right? Those songs—I love those. I love a dance song that has some hidden lyric that says something like “I can't go on without you”—whatever it is. And it's just like, oh, I love it. I love a sad lyric in a very, very happy melody.

But me, immediately, I do go to... there's a song called "The River" by Robert Wyatt. And there's an entire record called *Mid Air* by Paul Buchanan from the Blue Nile. And actually, also pretty much every Blue Nile album, particularly.

[00:35:00]

Those—they just really—I cannot put those on and start to feel this pull towards this space of such—(*sighs*) *la flor de piel*, I think it's a saying in Spanish where like your skin is like the flower petal. And I'm just quivering with these tears that are about to happen and "This Mortal Coil" does that to me too. It's just something about—and there's this is songwriter Susanna—Susanna and her Magical Orchestra made a record which is—from start to finish, it just kills me. Oh, and Laura Nyro's "Lonely Women". The first part of that song is like unbearable. And of course, "The Single Petal of a Rose", Duke Ellington's song that he wrote for the Queen and said, "You can't release this for a hundred years after I die." Also, the story is always a really big one. And obviously, like any Arthur Russell song is going to make me weep, even though it could be a dance song.

So, there's just an ongoing—and that's a favorite question of mine. What song makes you cry the most? You know, that's my—I love asking that question. And then what film makes you cry the most? Because that's even more like, well, here we go. We're not really actually on a ride. We're going on a ride now.

**John Moe:** (*Chuckles.*) Well, what film makes you cry the most?

**Devendra Banhart:** Well, there was an HBO movie called *The Normal Heart*, I think.

**John Moe:** Larry Kramer.

**Devendra Banhart:** Yeah, Larry Kramer's. And yeah, I was crying so hard, I thought the neighbors were going to call the cops!

(*They laugh.*)

'Cause I was screaming! It was like a scream cry. It was rare. Obviously, you know, I'm talking about weeping, and I have a tear. But this was like that kind of like—(*chuckling*) I was like screaming, crying. That's the last one that I can think of where it was like that. But—

**John Moe:** You must meet people though.

**Devendra Banhart:** How about you?

**John Moe:** What makes me cry?

(*Devendra confirms.*)

I don't—boy. I don't know. I tend to find comedies. I tend to just steer my ship into those—

**Devendra Banhart:** What comedy makes you cry? That's a better question. I'm going to change my question from now on. What comedy makes you cry? Oof! Ooooh. Oh-ho, that's good.

**John Moe:** That's a good one. That's a good one. I mean, if—mm. Well, you must get the people coming up to you and talking about your music the same way that you're talking about some of this other music or some of these films. You know, you must be providing that deep, emotional adventure for other people the way that you get it from your favorite artists.

**Devendra Banhart:** Well, I don't know. (*Chuckles.*) Well, first off, I did just recently rewatch *Joe Versus the Volcano*, and that has moments that really make me laugh and can make me weep. It's a very sweet, simple film with a lovely message. Also, the film *Inside* with Willem Dafoe falls under cry and laugh. I mean, it's a great comedy. It's maybe my favorite like modern comedy at the moment. Highly recommend. It's also what tour is like.

I didn't—yeah, well, to answer your question, I—when I first started out, I think I thought I was like the greatest songwriter of all time. And like (*chuckling*) there should be a billion documentaries about me. And you know, I'm like, “I should get every Grammy ever. And I'm just the most brilliant songwriter that's ever existed.” Okay. That's the attitude (*laughing*) I had my first two or three records. That's what I really think. “The world doesn't know, or they—” That's kind of like—“And I'm going to prove it!” That's even—yeah. “They don't even know, but I'm like the fucking best!” And then it goes into, well, this is obviously not real. I'm also not the worst, and I'm just doing my thing. And I know what my thing is. And the minute I... and knowing what my thing is—what that means is that my thing is just practicing this. Because there's no “actually, I figured it out”. There's no figuring it out. This is the most mysterious thing. I don't know how this works.

And understanding how to navigate through not knowing how this works is how I operate. And that's kind of what I'm doing here. And poetry is the most important thing in my life. And if somebody asks me, “What really matters to you?” I'll tell them having a new song to sing. So, however that manifests, I'm into it.

[00:40:00]

I'm going to work on it. I don't understand how it works, but I've been doing it for a long time. And that's just—so, this is half—this is going down. That's just how it's been for a while. And then only recently, only recently, based on this last tour, I got a little sense that maybe some of these songs, maybe they do mean something to some people. And that was beautiful.

**John Moe:** Just now, just on this last tour?

**Devendra Banhart:** Just now! Yeah, because I think at the beginning, I was so kind of egocentric and arrogant and like borderline, you know—like, not either—really kind of really going either megalomaniacal insane nut “I'm better than like John Lennon times a billion”, to

“I am the—” Because it also jumped down to “I’m the worst piece of shit songwriter in the universe. What am I doing? Why am I doing this? Throw this thing away. You know, get—whatever, you need to get a job. This is like—” So, it was going—it was going back and forth. I should have added that part. Of course. But anytime I think that you’re thinking you’re like the hottest shit, it’s typically, I imagine, that you’d jump down. But that’s built in. That was a part of it.

So, then it was just this kind of—I just know what I do, and I do it to share, but what other people think, it isn’t really like my business in a way. But only now recently, it even—just from someone saying, “Oh, this song meant a lot to me.” I feel like I hadn’t even heard that for so long. And it doesn’t make me think, “Wow, I’m the best!” But it makes me feel so honored. And it’s actually quite humbling. So, I feel like maybe now I can actually hear it in the right way, because it has nothing to do with me. And it’s very difficult to apply this in our day-to-day life. But when somebody is really, really complimentary towards us or really critical, it really has nothing to do with us. They’re just expressing a joy. Like, you were a part of that joy.

*(Enthusiastically.)* “Hey, that’s—you’re just amazing, what you did. Oh, John, your—that last episode was amazing! You’re incredible!” Like, wow, you inspired this thing. You gave some joy, but they’re expressing that joy. It’s really the joy is the thing. It’s not really you. You’re just a part of that. And they go, “John, that thing you said was fucking fucked up. And what the fuck’s wrong with you?” That’s also their own trip, their own darkness. And it’s like they’re kind of riding this like wave that you created the momentum for, but it’s also not about you.

**John Moe:** Well, as you talk about dealing with the past and your perspective on yourself in the past, I understand that you did some house cleaning right around the time you were making this record. And you got rid of some archives. Can you tell me what you did with that and why you did it?

**Devendra Banhart:** *(Chuckles.)* I just had this—you know, if there was a show about how to—like world’s worst cook, you know, like who can give someone food poisoning like the quickest.

*(John laughs.)*

Like, okay. And the judges—“Aaand go!” You know, it’s like that. And the clock starts ticking. Like, I would win every season of that show. I would win every season of that show. I will make you an ice and water. And I will give you food poisoning. I have the touch.

*(John laughs.)*

I think it’s like if the Olympics ever has worst chef category, I will represent.

**John Moe:** Gold medal.

**Devendra Banhart:** I will get the gold medal for sure! They'll have to ask me to just judge. Because, you know, no one can compete. And so, this pantry—since no food is in this pantry, it just keeps getting filled up with this library of notebooks. And it's years and years of them. Moleskins and composition books and those really nice Japanese ones. It's just full. And I thought they were the most precious thing in the world. And they were my—they're like my Library of Alexandria, and someday they'll be in the Smithsonian. And yeah, I'm really having these thoughts.

**John Moe:** And it's lyric ideas? And it's—?

**Devendra Banhart:** It's all—yeah, it's everything that's turned into an album. So, it's just lyrics through the years. So, maybe like if there's—however many there were. Let's say ten at a time will be an album. And some of them will go up to—you know, it takes 20 of these notebooks to get an album. And so, this thing over time really builds up. I think of it as my most—the most precious thing in my house. If this burnt down, I would just—I couldn't handle it. Imagine my house getting robbed—which it did get robbed, but of course no one stole that. Of course! I should have seen—that should have been the first moment. They're gonna take my laptop, my shoes, you know. It really has happened. Of course, I mean, who's gonna take my notebooks? But in my mind, (*gasps*) the house gets robbed. That's what they're gonna take! Or it lights on fire, that's the only thing that I'm going to care about. Of course, it's my most precious thing! It's my life's work! That was it too. My life's work! And of course, this will be given to the other people. They'll look into this and go—

[00:45:00]

“Wow, the workings of a genius!” (*Laughs.*) “Look at this, their process is so unique!” Yeah, this is what I'm—and so, when—and I'm just kind of—this is all peripherally in my mind, because I'm accumulating it. It's my archives. It seems like a classic thing to do. Also, I'm not judging other people that do this. And I hope other people do that, because half of my books—artist books have their archives. And I buy artist archives. And they're fascinating to me. And I go to libraries to look at art archives. So, I love it. This is just totally about me. This is the most subjective thing, nothing to do with other artists doing this. Personally, it was the moment where I realized this thing I think of as my entire identity and extremely precious and extremely important to me and that, wow, it's gonna be my gift to humanity—yada, yada, all this stuff. What is it? It's just—no, it's a fucking sand painting. And this is just dead weight. This is like, I'm—this is really not the path I want to go down. I need to ritualistically clean the slate.

And so, I burnt every notebook over about a month. And... (*caught between laughter and fake despair*) I regret every single moment of it! I need them back! And I've been trying to tape them all back together ever since.

**John Moe:** Really?

**Devendra Banhart:** No, it was a wonderful feeling, you know. At one point, yeah, this piece of paper flew up and said, “Fruit is cool,” and I realized, okay, this can go. This—no, the world doesn't need this under a piece of glass at the National Archives. This can go into the fire.

**John Moe:** (*Laughs.*) Well, fruit is pretty cool, but—

(*Devendra agrees with a laugh.*)

But I think we all knew that, so. Well, so my question is this. If you did—

**Devendra Banhart:** But that felt good. I recommend people doing that. Because it's going to happen. All your belongings will be—someone else will be wearing all your clothes. Someone else will be spending your money. Somebody else will be reading your books. So, as much as you can—and, you know, enjoy your things, of course. And enjoy collecting your things, but also enjoy giving them away while you can. It's so nice that while you're alive, you get to give it. It's kind of like getting to be at your own funeral, seeing somebody else walk around with your clothes.

**John Moe:** Hmm. So, my question then is this. If you did this purge of these ghosts, of this documentation of these things from your past, did that do anything to silence that critical voice that we talked about since the beginning of this interview? Did you lose some weight, and did you lose that voice in that process?

**Devendra Banhart:** I've never lost the voice. I've never, ever lost the voice. I've only done activities that make the—either the quieting down or the emergence of a voice that isn't a voice but this enthusiasm, which we call inspiration, emerge. Where you go, oh, I know which way to go. I know the direction to go in. So, this kind of propulsive energy—so, it's kind of propulsion light—emerges when I do certain activities. But that voice has never been totally—it's never—it's just been napping, basically. Or it's just been observing. And the more that I become a witness to my own thoughts—which was just—the only way I figured out how to—managed how to cultivate that is by meditation—is the more that I can have that distance between it. And I can observe it and let it flow by when it emerges, but it's never fully gone away.

But then when I'm working, when I'm painting, when I'm really writing and recording, I don't exist. You know, so it isn't that—it isn't like, wow, the voice is quiet now. It's like I don't even know if the voice—it could be yelling that I'm the—I don't even know, because I am just not even there. Which is a wonderful place to be, which is so—oh, it's a magical place to be. The best.

But burning all that stuff, it just felt like a very healthy, irrational, ritualistic—when I say irrational, I mean ritualistic. So, let's say it felt like a very healthy, ritualistic activity. And so—you know, and that's an extreme one, but it felt really good to just do. And I recommend maybe doing more... mellower ones through the day. Maybe talk to someone who isn't there or talk to a tree. That's a great one. Talk to a tree out loud. Yeah, that's it. You can just say hi. Good one. Talk to an ant. Good one. You know, that one's not even that strange to me. But whatever it is, it's got to feel irrational to you.

[00:50:00]

And then move it into the realm of ritual. I think it's really quite healthy to do that stuff.



**John Moe:** And in the ritual, there is the meaning.

**Devendra Banhart:** And then in the ritual, there is the meaning. Wow, that's beautiful! Interesting.

*(They laugh.)*

**John Moe:** Alright. Devendra Banhart, thank you so much for being with us.

**Devendra Banhart:** Oh, geez! Should we start this or what? I mean, are we're going to get back to—I didn't get to ask you a question!

*(They laugh.)*

Alright. Thanks, John. I really appreciate it.

**John Moe:** You can hear Devendra Banhart's music wherever you get music. I recommend you listen to it. A lot of people do. A lot of people really love his music, including me. Let's go out on some more of it here. This is the title track from Devendra's latest album, *Flying Wig*.

**Music:** “Flying Wig” from the album *Flying Wig* by Devendra Banhart, a floaty, dreamy track.

*I'm alone, dancing naked*

*On an eye without a head*

*Like a wish, I can finally confess*

*With no need for words I no longer possess*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Music:** “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

**John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* exists because people donate to it. We are dependent upon the donations of our listeners. If you have already joined *Depresh Mode*, thank you. You are helping get the show out into the world where it's helping people. If you haven't joined yet, it's easy to do, just go to [MaximumFun.org/join](http://MaximumFun.org/join), [MaximumFun.org/join](http://MaximumFun.org/join). And then find a level that works for you and select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. It's that easy. You will listen differently knowing that you are one of the producers of this program. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews, all that helps get the word out about the show.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the United States by calling or texting 988. It's free, it's available 24/7.

Our Instagram is [@DepreshPod](#). Be sure to swing by Facebook and check out our Preshies group on Facebook. You can join that group. A lot of great discussion happening over there about mental health, about the show, people helping each other out, people sharing some laughs. It's a lot of fun. Join the Preshies group on Facebook. Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is available on Substack. You can search that up. I'm on Twitter and Instagram @JohnMoe. Please use our electric mail address. It's [DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org).

Hi, credits listeners. I thought of a comedy movie that makes me cry. *School of Rock*. In the big battle of the bands scene at the end, when the girl who's a backing singer steps forward and takes a solo, I cry like—I cry a lot.

*Depresh Mode* is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We got booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, “Building Wings”. *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

**Music:** “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller.

*I'm always falling off of cliffs, now*

*Building wings on the way down*

*I am figuring things out*

*Building wings, building wings, building wings*

*No one knows the reason*

*Maybe there's no reason*

*I just keep believing*

*No one knows the answer*

*Maybe there's no answer*

*I just keep on dancing*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Amy:** Hey, this is Amy from Rockville, Maryland. And I want you to know that your worst moments do not define you.

**Transition:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

**Speaker 1:** Maximum Fun.

**Speaker 2:** A worker-owned network.

**Speaker 3:** Of artist owned shows.

**Speaker 4:** Supported—

**Speaker 5:** —directly—

**Speaker 6:** —by you!