

[DYLAN HICKS, "INSTEAD OF THIS"] Am I wearing my sunglasses? OK, I had a few other questions. Can you hover like a Kingfisher? Can you hover like a Kingfisher? Can you hover like a Kingfisher, then perch on a reed, gulping, while I adjust my aperture? Can you laugh more heartily at my jokes?

INTERVIEWER: That is the sound of Minneapolis's Dylan Hicks with his song, "Instead of This." His latest album, called *Airport Sparrows*, was recorded with the Small Screens. That's a chamber pop sextet that draws on jazz, folk, chamber music, and R&B. That album came out last fall.

Now, he's gearing up for a show at the Dakota. Dylan, who's a singer-songwriter, novelist, and DJ, joins us right now to talk about some of his work. It's great to hear your voice again. How have you been, Dylan?

DYLAN HICKS: Oh, I've been great. Thanks for having me back.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks for being here. Hey, tell us about the last piece we heard from you. What's it all about?

DYLAN HICKS: I mean, I guess it's a little ambiguous. I often write in character. The character's sort of in distress and sort of imagining other things that could be happening that would be worse. I guess the main thing about that song is that, atypically, I wrote it sort of in prose, away from an instrument, and really not with a song in mind, and then later tried to set it to music. So it doesn't have a conventional rhyme or meter like most of my songs do.

INTERVIEWER: Tough to do that, to try to set an existing piece of prose to music?

DYLAN HICKS: Well, I do a lot of revisions so that I can kind of sing it. It was kind of liberating, and I think it ended up giving the group a little more freedom, so I really enjoyed it. I was surprised at how much I could get away with, without those-- I do love those formal devices of, OK, I have nine syllables to work with and my ABAB rhyme scheme, but it's been fun lately to kind of break away from that a bit.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the group that you're with, Small Screens. How do you blend jazz, folk, chamber music, and R&B? That's quite a mix.

DYLAN HICKS: Well, so it's a six-piece group. So we have a lot of players, and everybody has different experience-- so Zacc Harris, Michelle Kinney, Christopher Thomson, Peter Hennig, Charlie Lincoln, and me. Many of those players have a background in jazz. Some of them, like Michelle, have a background more in experimental music, classical music. And then I'm more of a pop-rock-folk guy who loves jazz and has learned a few things from it, but isn't really-- and I don't get called to play the jazz gigs.

[LAUGHTER]

So I think that all of our sensibilities combined, it's a real flexible, versatile group. I love music of all styles, so I just kind of try to incorporate as much as I can without overstretching.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. Let's go back to *Airport Sparrows*, the album. We've got another song from the album, so let's hear it.

[DYLAN HICKS, "I AIN'T FORGOTTEN YOU"]

(SINGING) I don't recall the origins of all these scrapes and dents. And at present, I can't name the Secretary of Defense, nor all my grade-school teachers, though some faces come to mind. And everything they taught us, I left half of that behind. I rarely call on birthdays. No one expects me to.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about this song.

DYLAN HICKS: Well, this one's kind of an outlier on the album. It's more of a singer-songwriter, acoustic song. It's not literally autobiographical, but it has that presentation of the person singing is speaking from experience. And I guess it's a song I couldn't have written when I was younger. It's a middle-aged song.

But people respond to it. It's one of those songs that I had to learn how to temper emotionally. When I first wrote it, I would sort of break down a bit in the third verse, so I had to kind of distance myself from it. And now I have to kind of remember what it felt like to write in order to try to evoke that emotion again.

INTERVIEWER: Why'd you break down? Just curious. What was going on inside you?

DYLAN HICKS: The last verse is just a lot about memory and loss, and it made me cry. And so I would have a hard time singing it. And it would be a struggle just to get through it. So I think oftentimes with songs, sometimes in the beginning, the emotion is a little too present.

And it's not as effective because it makes people uncomfortable. And then later, you have to kind of learn to restore some of that affect, but in a dramatic way, basically, to act it. So there's that process, I think.

INTERVIEWER: Which is hard, hard to do. I want to keep talking about your music, but I also want to hear what music you're listening to.

DYLAN HICKS: Yeah, sure.

INTERVIEWER: What's inspiring you, right? So we asked you to send us some songs that are sparking your curiosity and your interest right now. Let's listen to one piece that you sent us.

[CÉCILE MCLORIN SALVANT, "THUNDERLOUDS"]

(SINGING) Sometimes you have to gaze into a well to see the sky. Sometimes you have to gaze into a well to see the sky.

INTERVIEWER: Who is this? Wow.

DYLAN HICKS: That's Cécile McLorin Salvant. I don't know how old she is now, but she's a relatively young jazz singer, but also really quite an eclectic singer. I've seen her perform at the Dakota, and she's very captivating, and she has a wonderful style. I think she makes her own clothes, and they're beautiful and creative just like her music is. She has an extended work that the Walker is presenting.

And I don't know. She writes her own material, but she also interprets songs from Kurt Vile to Kate Bush, you know? And she really approaches everything in a very idiosyncratic-- so I guess she's just inspiring and just that sort of treating music as a universal resource.

INTERVIEWER: Mm. You mentioned music as a universal source. I think the last time-- well, the first time I talked to you was-- I want to say it was back in 2012, when you had your debut novel, *Boarded Windows*.

DYLAN HICKS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: Had you on the air. We talked about the book. And for folks who are listening, Dylan has published a couple of novels, written a lot of journalistic essays over the years. What does music express that your words don't?

DYLAN HICKS: Well, I guess music was the thing that first enchanted me. When I was a little boy, my mom would sometimes let me buy a 45 from the end cap at K-Mart in Minot, North Dakota.

[LAUGHTER]

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I remember 45s.

DYLAN HICKS: And I'm kind of still doing that. Now, they're LPs or CDs or whatever. But to me, song lyrics are already a part of literature. In other words, they don't need to be promoted. Sometimes you'll see someone say, wow, this songwriter is almost a poet. I say, well, we're already writing literature. Just our form is song lyrics.

I still feel connected to that part of me, but I also just love trying to write melody and harmony. And I particularly love working with other musicians and hearing their ideas and having things transformed by their creativity and by their talent.

INTERVIEWER: I'm more familiar with your written work, you know? So how did you get into music? Who was the person that inspired you?

DYLAN HICKS: My parents were music listeners, and my stepfather is a good guitarist. He's not a professional musician, but he's always liked to play guitar. My dad, my biological dad, was in college in the early '60s and when it was fashionable to listen to jazz, so he had a lot of Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis and modern jazz quartet records that he let me kind of liberate from his parents' home without charging me. [LAUGHS]

So I started a little jazz collection of very beat-up records from the early '60s, when I was a teenager. And so there were a lot of parental sources. And I also would volunteer at KFAI Radio, the community station, which is where I met my wife, Nina Hale, who's an important person around town, particularly to me. And--

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

DYLAN HICKS: --music really was sort of the first thing. I kind of came into writing because I also loved that and also because although I've made a vast fortune as a musician, it's just not vast enough, so I kind of moved to literary fields. It's a little bit more lucrative.

[LAUGHTER]

INTERVIEWER: Well, clearly, the influence of jazz on you is in your work, and I appreciate that. I want to go back to somebody else that's inspiring you and that we're going to play another little bit of music here. This is one last piece that you say you're inspired by, so let's hear it.

[ANGELICA SANCHEZ, "GENERATIONAL BONDS"]

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. That's some classic jazz there. Feels like it, anyway. Who's that?

DYLAN HICKS: Yeah. That's a really long piece. I mean, it's 12 minutes long. It's partly composed but largely improvised. Angelica Sanchez is the leader of the group, and then Michael Formanek and Billy Hart are the-- it's a great trio. So that record just really captivated me. It's the kind of record that I feel like I can keep listening to and not get to the bottom of.

INTERVIEWER: Dylan, I have enjoyed our conversation. And again, it's been so long since we've talked. Thank you, and have a great time at the Dakota.

DYLAN HICKS: Hey, thank you. Thanks for having me on.

INTERVIEWER: That was Minneapolis-based musician Dylan Hicks. He'll be playing the Dakota in Minneapolis tonight along with the Neighborhood Quartet. If you can't catch his show, but want to hear more of his music, go to DylanHicks.bandcamp.com.