

You grew up playing the piano; at this first Hellfest show, you played the cello as part of the Jo Quail Quartet, and at your own shows, on stage, you play the guitar. Is the fact that you're a multi-instrumentalist a crucial part of your music writing process?

I think it is! But I think it's kind of the other way around. I've been a multi-instrumentalist since I was quite small, I started piano when I was very young, I was maybe 6 I think, and then cello, and I started collecting instruments as I went along, so when I write now, the very first part of the demo has always got vocals, or piano, or guitar, but then very quickly I start to think about how to do the instrumentation on a wider scale, so quickly then the cello comes out, and I work on the string arrangements, and the piano comes out, so it's just having lots of tools in your toolkit. It's a bit like being able to talk lots of different languages, you know – because you can, you do. So, if I couldn't play those instruments, I guess maybe my sound would be a bit different, I suppose!

Are you a permanent member of the Jo Quail quartet, or were you invited as a guest for this night only?

Well, I'm not really sure, haha! I performed with them at Roadburn in 2019, again with MONO, and I'm not sure if there have been performances that Jo has done with the quartet that I haven't been involved with, quite possibly there have. So, I'm not sure if I'm only in there when it's something kind of MONO-related or not, I don't know, to be honest! But I'll be there whenever she needs me, so it's all good.

You released your first EP in 2019, exhibiting an already fully-formed and unique musical identity. Immediately after that, you played Roadburn festival and opened for Cult of Luna in beautiful venues later that year. Do you feel like you've skipped a few steps in the archetypal "musician's journey"?

I think so, in a way. A.A. Williams as a project was born not long before that EP came out, it was a kind of very definite decision to try to write my own music and to explore that avenue, and I'm very grateful that it didn't take me that long to get to the point where I was able to release something. Having this first gig at Roadburn, I mean, that was just a kind of dream situation. At the time, I got this email saying, 'Hey, do you want to do this gig?' and I thought 'Okay, cool', you know. It was the first one that had been booked, but I didn't expect it to be the *first* one, like the debut of everything. But then, as other bookings started to come in, like this Cult of Luna tour for example, and stuff like that, it was all after Roadburn, and it was getting closer and closer, and we thought 'Well, why don't we make Roadburn the showcase, the first presentation of A.A. Williams?' It was kind of good luck, I think, but then as it got closer it became, 'Why don't we try and deliberately make this the first thing, just to see what happens, and to see how people respond, it would be a pretty cool thing to start with.' And from there... I mean, this is the thing, getting that booking in itself at Roadburn... People spend lives trying to get that. And I'm incredibly grateful that Walter [Hoeijmakers, directeur artistique du festival Roadburn, *ndlr*] took a bit of a punt on this brand-new artist and thought, 'You know what, yeah, let's put that on.' So I certainly think there are steps that maybe have been kind of skipped, or that were made shorter. But then, on the flip side, there is so much work that always goes on behind the scenes that people don't see. People see what you post on social media and it's like 'Oh, you've got this nice tour', and you think 'Well, that's great, but do people realize the amount of work that goes on over here to create those opportunities? They don't just fall out of the sky!' You gotta put in so much work into making this a coherent project and presenting it in a good way, and with social media, and the way you present yourself live, and all this stuff to try and make it look as fully-formed and deliberate as possible... It takes a lot of work! So everyone was like, 'Oh, it just came out of nowhere!' – nothing

comes out of nowhere! You know, this is like the by-product of thirty-something years of learning instruments and learning to perform and learning all of this stuff, so it's all culminated into this project. But, you know, there's a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff going on which I think maybe people don't see.

You've stated before that you were very influenced by metal after discovering it in your teens, and you went on to work in the field of classical music. Is the music you write a way of reconciling those two passions, or is it something else entirely?

It's not a deliberate way of doing that, I suppose, but because I do love both classical and heavier popular music equally, I suppose it's a natural product of someone like me trying to write some music. I suppose when I'm writing, sometimes I think 'I need something that provides some sustain – let's put some strings on', rather than, 'Oh let's put a synth on', because there is that classical part of the brain working as well, and I suppose having a bit of the theoretical knowledge doesn't hurt when it comes to working on your instrumentation. But, you know, it was never a deliberate plan to try and fuse the two together in any way. I guess I use the skills that I have to create something cool that I enjoy, and I happen to enjoy both classical music and heavy music, so I suppose there's a little kind of blend going on there sometimes.

Well, it certainly sounds authentic.

Thank you! That's all I try, to be honest, to write music that's enjoyable and good and that I enjoy writing and performing. That's the starting point of all of it.

You've had your start in the metal scene despite playing music that many metalheads wouldn't maybe expect. Have you at any point felt like an outsider, or did you immediately fit right in?

That's a tricky one! You know, there were quite a few people commenting about Hellfest, posting pictures on the Internet, for example, saying 'This was by far the quietest thing there, but we loved it!' I'm never really worried about whether I fit in or not, because I figure that people make these bookings for me because they think it fits. It's not like they haven't heard the records, or maybe seen me live in the past. And I do think certainly that it's heavier live than it is on the records, just because you have the added benefit of physical volume that you can't have when you're listening to vinyl. You don't have this huge PA and all the amps, so there is a bit more weight to it live, I think, and I suppose those elements are the bits that connect to people who enjoy really heavy music. And the soft bits, to be honest, are kind of a moment of solace and calm in an otherwise quite frantic, loud environment, and I think it's nice to have a bit of both, so I've never worried whether I fit, because I figure that if people didn't like it, they wouldn't come! And they don't have to like it, it's completely up to them what they think of it, but people seem to be accepting of it, so I can't argue with that.

Great, I mostly wanted to know your perception of it, because, well, people were there at your Hellfest show, it was packed, especially for a 5 p.m. show!

Yeah, I was so, so happy with the amount of people, I thought that there would be like a tenth of that, so I was just overjoyed! I thought 'Maybe they'll only come if it's raining and they need to hide in the tent', but I was so pleased! It was one of my favourite ever gigs, that was wonderful.

A few years ago, Steven Wilson played Hellfest too, and he came on stage and played something from his solo catalogue, something very soft, and he said to the crowd, 'I guess to you, we must sound like ABBA!' But he was very much proud of that.

I mean, Hellfest especially is this huge festival, especially this particular one with the two weekends, there's so much heavy music – it's nice to have a little bit of something just a little different. Not a lot different, like we said, there are common threads, but just enough to create a bit of variety in your day! You don't want to listen to heavy music *all day*, you need a little bit of a break every now and then. So you can come and relax a little bit!

I think that would be giving what you do maybe too little credit, but it's certainly one aspect of it also.

Good, I hope so.

Did you decide to go with A.A. Williams as your stage name so that you'd always show up first in alphabetical lists?

Hahaha! No! That's a great question, but no, absolutely not, that's just my name! To be honest, at the very beginning, there was a discussion as to whether it should have like a band name, or whatever, and the thing that really made me choose this was the fact that it didn't really imply any sort of genre, it's just a name, it could be anything. It could be electronic, rock, anything. So having something like that, which wouldn't restrict to having to create music of a certain style... You know, if you call yourself like 'DEATH SKULL 666', it's not going to be an acoustic folk kind of thing, you know what I mean? It's unlikely people would expect that of you. So I think if it's something a little bit more general, then you're freer to just do what works for you musically. Being first does help, though, I'm not gonna lie.

It's a nice bonus.

It's an added perk, yeah.

How did you form your live band?

My bass player is my husband, so he's been doing all the bass on the recordings, all the way since the very beginning. My guitarist/keyboard player Matt, at the very beginning, was actually my sound engineer. And we were chatting about him maybe wanting to get back to performing, rather than doing all the front-of-house technical stuff. So he just kind of fell into it, really, and it's great to have him. Partially because he's an amazing musician, but also because he does have that technical knowledge, just in case we ever have any sort of nightmare, he's an absolute knight in shining armour when it comes to that stuff, it's amazing to have him. And then Wayne, my drummer, is a friend of my husband's, and he joined probably about 6 or 7 gigs in. As with anything, you try and form the right team at the beginning, and you don't always get the right people right away, so you have to try and find the right people who fit in in terms of the playing, but also the personalities, and how everyone gels together. So Wayne came on about 6 or 7 shows in from the very beginning and has been with us ever since.

You started touring for your EP only a few months before every band in the world had to stop touring for close to two years. Was being stopped in your tracks so quickly especially discouraging or did it make you even more determined?

A bit of both, to be honest. When it all closed, we were halfway through a tour with Sisters of Mercy. We'd done the UK part and we were due to then go off and do some shows in the Netherlands with them. They had this whole European tour booked, and every day they were getting more and more

shows cancelled, and gradually the whole tour fell apart, so the decision was made not to try and go to the Netherlands, because we were concerned, us and Sisters, that we'd basically go and then not be able to get home again. To be honest, I think COVID cancelled it all for us, nobody really made the decision, it just kind of happened. If you look at the timeline, we'd been performing for less than a year when this all happened, so it felt quite frustrating. There were so many cool things in the diary that got moved or written off altogether. I mean, those shows with Sisters, they happened this year, a couple of months ago, so it's been two and a bit years waiting for those to happen. It's crazy that everyone's diaries just moved so far. But also, what can you do? So in terms of releasing *Forever Blue* during the pandemic and everything else, it just seemed like 'Well, we gotta carry on.' Because everything is so early in the kind of trajectory that we hope to follow, you can't just stop now. Once you start, you have to carry on, try to find ways to engage with fans during lockdown, do a few livestreams, try to keep moving. It was frustrating for everyone, it's not like we were the only band in that position, so you gotta look at the bigger picture. You can't be that annoyed about it.

What kind of energy do you tap into while writing lyrics?

In general, writing songs is quite a meditative experience for me. So I think first, certainly for the EP and *Forever Blue*, I was very much looking inwards, trying to unpick lots of stuff that was going on in here. Not necessarily going on at the time of writing, stuff that's happened over the course of your life, you just sit there trying to figure out how you feel about it now. That's a big thing to do, and it's quite therapeutic to get to the other side and have written a song about whichever subject, and go 'Oh, I understand this a bit better now for having gone through this process.' I think the new album is maybe a little bit less introspective and little bit broader, but ultimately, when people write, the thing they know the best is themselves, so using that as a starting point... I don't know if that's what everybody does, but it's what I do.

I guess some bands write fiction, too.

Yeah, I've tried that and it's terrible, I'm not gonna lie, haha! Sometimes you go, 'I'm gonna write a concept song!' And it's really, I don't know... Maybe one day, I'll manage it, but at the moment, they come out like nursery rhymes, so... No one gets to hear those.

When you perform live, you always look fully caught up in the emotions that your music summons. Is it difficult to do this emotional labour every night, or do you get used to it after a while somehow?

Some songs are harder than others from that point of view. I remember singing a version of *Fearless*, I did an acoustic version of it a few months ago, and it was just a few months after my dad had passed away, and I could not get to the end of it in any sort of practice context. It was a nightmare, to be honest, even though that's not what the song was written about! I think that's because I generally try to write songs where the text is not so specific that it couldn't apply to other people's experiences, that's the whole point for me. Like we said, I start with myself and what I know, but it's all about writing songs that can be applied to a whole bunch of situations. Everyone can look at it and go 'Oh, that makes me feel like that time when this happened'. So in that sense, trying to perform *Fearless*, even though it's got nothing to do with grief or anything like that... In that moment, trying to deal with these emotions and also sing that song was a complete disaster. And I did perform it once like that at a show last March, and it was great, and I loved getting to the end of it successfully, but it was really tricky to sing, because an acoustic, stripped-down version with just the vocals and piano – it's as raw as anything. So trying to navigate those emotions whilst performing and not having your voice crack or

anything like that is hard, but to be honest I've not had any major issue with the other songs. I think that one time with *Fearless* was the hardest one. I think, in a weird way, your experience writing the songs is one thing, and then your performance is another. So, you're emotionally attached to it, but also, this is your job, you know, so you can't just fall down in pieces every night when you sing a song, you'd never get anywhere! It's gotta be truthful, and it is a real issue, but you have to keep a lid on it, because otherwise, you'd never get to the end of a gig! So it's a bit of a balancing act, I guess, but we'll see! If that happens again, we'll know about it, I suppose.

You have a new album coming out in October. Do you want to tell us about it a little?

Yes! I'm so excited about it, honestly. It's called *As The Moon Rests*, and it'll be a double LP this time, 11 songs. It was finished, made, recorded, all of that, towards the end of last year, and I'm really pleased with it, I'm dead chuffed! And as we mentioned before, from a lyrical point of view, it's a little bit more general, but still written in the same way. The instrumentation is like, times 10, there's a full string ensemble and everything now. A lot of this was down to just having more time to make it, to be honest, to be able to spend more time in the studio, playing with different guitar tones, and being able to luxuriate and having a little bit more time to try stuff, to explore, and just giving myself more time to do vocals instead of trying to rush it out. So I think from the production point of view, it sounds bigger, there's more variety, it's really cool. I'm dead pleased.

You had recorded the EP and *Forever Blue* mostly from home, right?

That's true, the EP was fully created in my old flat... [le chien réclame de l'attention, 30 secondes d'entracte] The first EP and most of *Forever Blue* were recorded in my home, I did all the vocals for *Forever Blue* at home, so it was lovely to do the entire thing in the studio this time, not having to worry about trying to engineer it, sing it, run around with all the cables, and also navigate the sound of North London, the fire engines running past the house... I'd get a really great take, listen to it on its own and go, 'Is that someone starting a motorbike outside? *Vroom!* Well, I can't use that, let's start again.' So even from a logistical point of view, being able to not have to worry about trying to engineer it was nice. Because I'm certainly not an engineer, I'm kind of making it up as I go along, trying to learn this stuff, but not to the extent that one can make a proper album, so I'm very grateful to have had a guy called Adrian Hall, who's mixed everything up to this point, but he engineered the whole thing as well this time, and it's an absolute dream, honestly. I'm really pleased.