

DEVENDRA BANHART

We chat to the musician and artist about Michael Jackson, Polish science fiction and his first psychedelic experience.

WORDS ANNE FULLERTON PHOTOS LAUREN DUKOFF

Within 20 seconds of talking to Devendra Banhart, it becomes obvious that this will be an interview only in the loosest sense of the word. An interview implies that one person asks questions and the other answers them. This happens some of the time. The rest of the conversation follows the same surreal logic as his music. The plight of child stars foreshadows human progress, household pets become proof of a higher power, and it's pretty hard to determine which of his answers would withstand rigorous fact checking – not that Banhart's nomadic life (US-born, Venezuela-raised and currently LA-based) makes that any easier. Anyone worrying that the diminishing facial hair and slick fashion campaign mean Banhart is on the straight and narrow can sleep easy. He may not look like Topanga Canyon Jesus anymore, but he's still the same dude who spent a quarter of his record deal on crystals.

Hi Devendra, what are you up to at the moment? I have to go to a meeting really soon. But right now, I've been really into the Mexican artist referred to as "The Sun of Mexico". "The Latin Frank Sinatra" some have called him, but really he's his own man: Luis Miguel. I've been watching interviews of the young Luis Miguel. Do you know who Luis Miguel is?

I can't say I do. Well, you have been living under a rock sister! Luis Miguel is this huge Latin American pop star who is all seedy looking and awesome. When he was a kid, he was really out there – kind of like Michael Jackson. Too cool for that age! It's unhealthy to be the coolest guy when you're five years old. Where do you go from there if you just evolve and progress in a way that's not the speed the rest of us do? Maybe in the future we'll be up to speed and that's how shit is and it's normal. Because a lot of things that we do today, we don't have the foresight to see how weird it is. But we do have the hindsight for past generations. Commercials, media, people's style, they seem insane! I mean even that thing that women wore, that article of clothing that makes their waists really tiny...

A corset? Yeah! Women were, like, dying. Yet that was a norm of society. So what's happening today that we don't have the foresight to see how very strange it is? Anyway, how are you?

I'm well thanks. If Luis Miguel was a really out-there five-year-old, what kind of kid were you? Oh dude, I was not cool.

What were you into? I was into Guns N' Roses. I had a knife collection, which is pretty weird, y'know, for a five-year-old. I actually had my first psychedelic experience when I was five. Psychedelics aren't my thing at all, maybe contrary to popular belief, but when I was five years old I really was tripping. I stepped on a fish called a horny toadfish and it's a fish that – actually, maybe that's a bit presumptuous, maybe you're a marine biologist. But this fish, for those who don't know, is a fish with a horn that buries itself in the sand. I stepped on the horn and I don't know if there's venom in there or not but the medication that was given to me in South America, even in the '80s, was vintage. It was old medication in a very small village far from Caracas and it was pulled out of an old trunk. So I was just tripping balls with knives, listening Guns N' Roses, I guess!

That's sounds like a pretty cool kid. Yeah, but I was very feminine. I'm sure my parents just thought I was going to become an interior decorator. I was like, "I like these linens, they're really quite nice. The wallpaper is just divine". I liked making little observations about the furniture and my mum's wardrobe. That was cool to me.

Speaking of your mum, is it true that your middle name is Obi? Yes, that is correct. It comes from a couple of things. My mother was really into voodoo at the time and the priest is called the obi-man, then her favourite tampons are O.B. tampons, then while she was waiting for her guru to name me she went to see *Star Wars*. Alec Guinness who plays Obi-Wan Kenobi came out, I started kicking a lot, and so they called me Obi after that.

Do you think you inherited any of his traits? I do like to wear ugly women's dresses and brown robes. No, I'm the opposite. He's like a wise, mellow kind of dude that makes sense and has interesting things to say. So I'm probably the antithesis of that.

You said your mother was into voodoo. Do you believe in anything supernatural? I would say that I'm more into natural





"I ACTUALLY HAD MY FIRST PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE WHEN I WAS FIVE. I WAS JUST TRIPPING BALLS TO GUNS N' ROSES"



stuff, that's super enough for me. Argh! What a fucking Hallmark answer that was. I don't know, of course I do. Literally right now there's a dog, his name is Bullet, at the house I'm crashing at. This dog had cancer, it beat cancer, and in the process of doing that it lost one ear. It's a very sweet, one-eared dog named Bullet who survived cancer. So that, for me, is supernatural. I have proof staring at me, wagging its little tail.

Where are you living at the moment? At my friend Rodrigo Amarante's house. Rodrigo is one of the great musicians in the world. He's in a band called Los Hermanos and he also put out a record under the name Little Joy with Binki Shapiro and Fabrizio Moretti, the drummer in The Strokes. Rodrigo is working on his solo record and it's incredible, so I have the honour of being able to stay at his house while I look for a house. I'm living in a little den in Los Angeles.

What was the last book you read? The last one was by Stanislaw Lem, who is an incredible science fiction writer but really he's a scientist, a genius. It's called... oh man, shit! I can't remember. Let me go find it. But he also made a book that was turned into a film with George Clooney called *Solaris*. I haven't seen the film, I think it was an old Russian film before that too. The book itself is un-be-lievable. I also am constantly reading anything by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. He's someone that a lot of people go through in high school or at young age but I've always returned to him. The one that I couldn't remember the name of is called *Fiasco*. It says here that it's "a science fiction novel concerning an expedition to communicate with an alien civilisation that evolves into a major fiasco". I wouldn't describe it exactly like that but I don't want to deter you from reading it. It's really incredible.

What was the last film you saw? I haven't seen movies for a long time. Well, I recently watched the 'Thriller' video; it's kinda like a film. My girlfriend actually filmed me watching it but you can't see that I'm looking at a computer. I'm trying to do the dance that Michael does. It's really, really terrible. Like, awful. I can't even approximate any single thing he does.

It says on your Wikipedia page that you collect musical artefacts.

Is that true? That is not true and I'm not sure where that came from. Well actually, I do know where that came from. I own very little in this world, and that's all subjective. In some senses I know I own a lot of stuff – a lot of books and records and stuff. But I can fit most of it in a car. I do have a couple of things in storage though. One of them is Jim Morrison's couch and I also have Bob Dylan's hat, a fur hat from the *Freewheelin'* Bob Dylan days. They're very meaningful physical possessions that maybe I shouldn't be attached to but I am. The only other thing I own that's really valuable to me is Vali Myers's earring. But none of those things really constitute musical artefacts. I have no say what goes on my page. In fact, once I tried to change it. I have remixed an Oasis song, which was really cool to me because I grew up listening to Oasis. I love that band, they're amazing. And lately I've been trying to do Liam's style. I've got my short hair, I'm wearing my little parka, walking round trying to be Liam in my old age. But the point is that I remixed this Oasis song and that's something that I'm really proud of. I was like, "Hey," to my manager, "Can we put that on Wikipedia?" He contacted the person that runs that page and he said, "No, because no one's ever heard of Oasis". I think it's some guy in India who just runs my page because my name is Indian but who really doesn't know about music. But really, I'm only saying all this because I am so secretive about my priceless musical artefacts that I don't even want you to know what I have.

I'm curious to know what Jim Morrison's couch looks like.

[Laughing] Oh, let's see. Have you ever been to an aquarium? It's like an aquarium but combined with the first time that you got your period.

Thanks very much for talking to us, Devendra.

Thank you! Hopefully we see you in Australia. I hope I haven't deterred you from ever wanting to meet me. ☺

Devendra's next album is out sometime in the future, he didn't say when. See more of Lauren's photos at laurendukoff.com.