



The REYKJAVÍK GRAPEVINE

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THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO LIFE, TRAVEL & ENTERTAINMENT IN ICELAND

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IN THIS MAGAZINE

POLITICS

Rounding Up The Cats

ACROBATICS

Is The Stripping Ban A Good Idea?

SHOPPING

Eyjafjallajökull: Tourist Eruption?

SPORTS

Do Icelanders Need Rugby?

TRAVEL

Snorkelling The Continental Drift



JÓNSI & NICO GO ERUPT!

Champagne & latex gloves
at The Leather Bar

Jónsi of Sigur rós has just released his first solo album, GO. It rules. Grapevine joined Jónsi and his Go collaborator Nico Muhly for a celebration, some champagne and a bit of trúfó at Reykjavík's Leather Bar. READ THE SORDID DETAILS INSIDE.

Feature | Interview



Nico And Jónsi GO ALL IN!

...and Grapevine got to sit in!

It's nearing midnight on Saturday, March 13, 2010. After a strenuous Icelandic Music Awards ceremony, the Grapevine feels like going home, watching Back To The Future II and kicking back with some popcorn. Which would be the smart thing to do.

However, Grapevine isn't very smart. So Grapevine opts for a post-ceremony beer at Kaffibarinn. Where Grapevine stumbles upon the giggling pair of Jón Þór Birgisson – Jónsi of Sigur rós – and composer Nico Muhly. The two are in high spirits, and we get to talking.

"Too bad we can't do that interview we've been talking about," Nico blurts out. Grapevine's heart sinks. "What? That's our feature for next issue!?"

"I'm leaving for Bandaríkin tomorrow at two. Didn't you get my e-mail?" Nico replies. "We could always do it now, though. Are you guys up for that?"

Jónsi and the Grapevine nod in unison. So off we go, to the only bar in Reykjavík one can enjoy conversation on a Sunday morning without getting all shouty and stuff. The super secret, super awesome MSC clubhouse – The Leather Bar. We borrow a bottle of champagne from nearby Boston and get to talking while deep house blurts in the background and the fetish cage stands vacant.

The following is a transcript of what went on that night.

Enjoy.

Leather Bar, night of the Icelandic Music Awards – 01:30 AM

Nico Muhly: So now we're here in Iceland. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I've been here trying to make sure the live show is good. Jónsi: There's a lot of shit going on. We are only five people in the live outfit, trying hard to make the album work within our confines.

N: Why didn't you want to tour with a mini-orchestra?

J: I don't know... I kind of wanted to start small, have it all raw and dirty – a stripped down version of the album. Because the album is so flamboyant and layered – in a really nice way – I wanted the live show to be kind of different from that. Maybe later this year we can do some crazy shit.

N: When we first talked about it, I was wondering how to treat these songs, when I first got the demos they were literally one guitar and his voice, nothing else.

J: It was as stripped down as possible: one acoustic guitar, one mic and a voice, with a click track.

N: I won't do anything without a click track; working without one is a disaster. The first song I arranged was Boy Lillikoi. I listened to the demo and thought, "I want to try something so outrageous for this, and I am just going to completely skeet all over its face!"

J: And this is why I wanted Nico to work with me the first place! I had heard one album with his arrangements, Sam Amidon's album [All Is Well], and I was like,

"Whoa! This is perfect for my music!" It was like this painting, a splash of colours that goes in and out – not like a constant carpet over the music. So I was really excited about this collaboration, to get this crazy vibe, this colour and texture all over the songs.

ON GOING APESHIT ON THAT BITCH

N: I remember, I took it home and was all "I'm just gonna go apeshit on this bitch," so I got all my midi woodwinds all over it and I sent it to Jónsi. I was so nervous, I thought: "He's gonna think I'm completely crazy." Now, first of all, midi demos are always the worst, it sounds like, you know, Legend of Zelda shit. But it seemed to work.

J: I think it was really good.
N: You were so happy.
J: I really liked it.

N: I remember, I woke up to your e-mail reply, and it was a very happy moment for me. "Good, this is a good start!"

J: I think it [Boy Lillikoi] is your best arrangement on the album, for some reason you were so inspired and it was the first spark, really full on and crazy.

N: It's super full on. It's also about as much shit as you can possibly get away with in pop music, ever.

J: I sent Nico the acoustic guitar demo through the internets. I got the file back and was all... "Hmmm... this is really full on. There's so much shit happening, it's cool and I really like it. It's perfect, exactly

what I wanted, really colourful and playful..."

We met two days later; he came to my home with his laptop and was sitting on the floor with a small midi controller. We did, like, five arrangements in that one night. I think that's so crazy! It's a really good example of the way Nico worked with us. I like to work kind of fast; I like to build things quickly, to see progress. It was thus exciting get to work with Nico, because he's so spontaneous and fast.

N: I like throwing things out if they don't work. I'm all like "Whoa, doesn't work! On to the next one..."

J: Exactly. I heard about Mr. Nico, that his best quality is to throw stuff away that folks don't like, without getting all of fended. His attitude is: "Whatever works, works. OK, start again from scratch, no problem..."

N: Throwing music away is so much fun, it's as much fun as wasting water. There's something delicious about it, you can turn it on and off, and you can totally admit it when it's not successful.

ON MOVING AWAY FROM SIGUR RÓS

J: Starting the album, I wanted to move away from Sigur rós, those floaty, dreamy landscapes. That made it kinda fun to work with you, because you had your midi controller and then you just played and played; "Oh, we have a flute now. What do you think about this? Eehh, can we have a little bit more this..." [starts singing]. That's how it worked. Super fast, super organised, no bullshit and he takes it home and works on it. I didn't think this kind of music could be that spontaneous, that's one thing I don't like about classical music and arrangement: it's too thought about and too worried about.

N: This music wanted to be ecstatic; it wanted to feel like a magic thing erupting from below. So the best way to do all the arrangements was to at first shit them out and vomit them out, make it be all messy and let there be gut reactions. They're your songs, and I kept telling you "I see brass band, a Mexican funeral," I basically kept throwing these images out...

J: I think that's really good, how we would visualize things. For example on Boy Lillikoi, we were talking about Saint Francis of Assisi and how he was preaching to the birds, all these images and layers and colours. I really like that, it's a good way to describe how music should be.

N: Arranging is really about taking the other person and making them as presentable as you can. It's as if you're designing a dress; it's not about making the dress look good, but the person wearing it. It's about finding something that is fabulous, that makes you sound fabulous. It shouldn't call attention to me – as an arranger, you have to erase yourself in the process. So spontaneity is the best way to accomplish this, and images are often the best way to accomplish that. Everything has to go together. That was something I really liked about the Sigur rós arrangements, there was a formality to them. They also just serve to make your voice sound so fabulous. What I wanted to do was make it a little bit naked, to claw a little in your range.

J: Exactly. I remember the images you tried to bring to mind: gardens and birds flying around and flowers growing. I think it's really cool to describe music and arrangements like that.

N: What was fun for me, too, was recording it, because we did it all in one go, in sections, and we did this thing where I designed the sections along with this contractor violinist, Nadia. We could record it quickly, but no one could believe we could do it as fast as I said.

ON SPONTANEITY

J: Yeah [laughs]! It was like, "That Nico Mueller is soooooo hyperactive. He's a workaholic. Everyone is talking about it!" It was an intense session. [All laugh].

I hadn't heard all the arrangements until we recorded them, Nico was working on them at the last minute, and we had to make all sorts of decisions right before they were recorded. He was always making these new things, right up until the deadline. It was intense, but very healthy.
N: One thing I wish, if we had more money for it, is that we could back one more time with more musicians and just do...
J: No that's bad.

N: Why?

J: It's very healthy, I think, making these fast decisions. It's healthy in music, and in life.

N: In everything.

J: Yeah.

N: Some of the best arrangements are results of stuff we said and did in the record-

ing sessions themselves. It was like a tornado at times, I brought this printer to the studio and every night it was spewing out a million pages of these new crazy things that we had worked on the night before. How many songs did we record? Fifteen?

More?

J: Fifteen.

N: And how come there's only nine on the album?

J: I don't know...? I think I kinda wanted to have it kind of uplifting and spontaneous and...

N: None of the slow jams went on the album.

J: Some of them did...

N: Which slow jams?

J: Like Hengilás and... Tornado

N: Tornado's a fast jam.

J: There are some slow jams on the album.
N: It's a funny thing. While we were making it the album seemed like such an enormous, spontaneous beast. What it is now is a bullet train of an album.

J: It's funny actually, how you go into an album. I wrote the songs in my apartment on an acoustic guitar, piano, harmonium and made these really simple demos that I shipped to Nico – with a click track – we went to the studio and we saw things build up quite quickly because of the fabulous arrangements, strings, brass and wind arrangements. It was quick – Nico only had like six days to record everything – I think it worked.

N: Not to mention the piano parts, which had all hysteria. Complete hysteria. Hahaha! It was hilarious, I got myself all jeezed up on coffee and just went completely nuts with it. I'd give you seventeen tracks on top of each other and catch the next train to New York.

J: It's Nico's trademark. He does a shitload of shit and leaves you with a shitload of shit, then you have to dig through it and find the gold nuggets, you know.

N: Yes! We made lots of good stuff that way! Also, for me it's more fun. It's like if you're a houseguest at someone's house and instead of giving them one present, you give them a whole kitchen of spices to serve.

J: Yeah, and they can throw out the things they don't like.

N: Everything, if that's the case. The amount of piccolo on that album... I think we really made the album with the most piccolo in modern music. I don't think there's any more.

J: Nico is obsessed with this piccolo part. I kind of can't hear it anymore. I've gotten numb to this piccolo thing. Do you have any questions, Haukur?

-Well, I love to hear you two talking together. You are so eloquent.

J: Elephant? Elegant? I have this TV blaring in my eyes, it's a little bit distracting [points to TV set in the corner, projecting homosexual pornography with regular cumshot intervals].

ON GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

-Well, How did your relationship develop? How did you guys come to know each other? You've both been in Iceland obviously, had you been hanging out and drinking champagne a lot?

J: I didn't know Nico AT ALL. When you came to one of our shows in New York, I spanked your ass that time...

N: ...that's right. A little spanking.

J: That was our introduction.

N: We got to know each other through this shy person thing, where we both sorta sent word through other people that maybe we wanted to do this thing with this certain person.

J: Yeah.

N: It was all done through like nineteen different people. E-mail chains. It was funny and shy. Hahaha.

-This album, it was two years in the making?

N: Last January was when we first started working together. So it was a year and two months ago.

-Did you know each other's music before you worked together?

J: No, Nico knew Sigur rós, probably.

N: Yeah, I knew Sigur rós.

J: I never listen to anybody's music, I never have a clue about any music at all, so I never heard Nico until Valgeir [Sigurðsson] gave me Sam Amidon's album. I met him at some show and he gave me Sam and the other Bedroom Community albums. I've not heard all of them yet, but I heard Sam's album and was like, "Yeah, this is pop!"

"It's Nico's trademark. He does a shitload of shit and leaves you with a shitload of shit, then you have to dig through it and find the gold nuggets, you know."

N: Yeah, it was weird about Sigur rós. It was a band for starters, and totally different from anything I was listening to. It was hard to evaluate the composition of the band. What was interesting about it is that it evolved into playing more composed pieces later. Like the songs didn't start emerging until the last two albums, like actual short songs.

J: Yeah, exactly, that's kinda true.

N: A lot of stuff, these endless ten minute long compositions, not quite ambient but kind of... Anyway, I knew my Sigur rós, for sure, I did my duty as a young gay college student and went to some show at the Fillmore or whatever, like in 1999 or something. I forget. It was like, right before Takk came out in the states, I saw a show with these Icelandic people. It was chaotic.

ON LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER

-So alright, you are now acquainted. The next logical question would be "You spent time working and communicating, did you learn anything from one another?"

J: In what way? Life in general? You mean better in life, like practical stuff? Alex [Somers, American visual artist and boyfriend/collaborator to Jónsi] is always telling me: "You're so good at life," meaning practical stuff. I don't spend time doing the day-to-day stuff. He always takes a long time to shower, I shower in like five minutes, then I'm out. When responding to e-mails, I just answer yes or no. I try and be practical like that, I think Nico is a little bit similar. No bullshit.

N: Yeah. As for stuff that I learned, for me – what I always learn when working with sorta non-classical musicians – you learn to be a good advocate for your ideas because those working with you don't read music. I can't go around sending people scores and asking if they don't think it's genius. Instead I need to invent a vocabulary to present my ideas.

J: It's all about sound.

N: Yeah and to be able to envision this dumm-diddy-dumm diddy, to convey that and articulate what I'm doing. So much stuff we sent back and forth, that was the big lesson, getting into your head a little bit, how you saw music.

J: Also, what surprised me a lot about Nico Mueller...

N: Möller!

J: That's such a good last name. Nicklaus Möller. Like Helga Möller. Anyway, I think the best thing about him is that he comes from the classical world, cuz I have always been sceptical about classical people and music schools and that, all that stuff is soooooo boring. What I have really liked about Nico was the spontaneity of him. That was the most surprising for me. He came in with his laptop and midi and that was exactly how it sounded on the album. These were good times, the two of us in my apartment, doing five arrangements in one night.

N: That was so much fun!

J: I know, and that's how it sounds on the album. Fun!

N: For me as a classical composer, it was so great not to have to put in all that pre-compositional work every time. If someone commissions me to write a piece, I'll work on it for days, figuring out all the bullshit and intricacies. Here I got to flow more freely, seeing your reactions as we went along.

J: That's how it should be with all music.

N: Yes. But still, one of the things I cherish in my life as a classical composer is how you have time to think about things. Sometimes, if someone commissions me to write a piece, I'll love to have a year to think about it. It comes and goes, in the scheme of the classical person's life... like when I started working on this opera that I've been writing for two years now, and I'll be writing for another six months...

J: How does it work? I don't understand! A piece on piano or cello... you obviously play piano very well, but how do you think about the cello part – how do you arrange it? As if it's a vocal line?

Because for me, I started playing instruments really early, at age thirteen I started playing the guitar and I decided

Feature | Interview

right away to write my own songs, because I was so bad at picking up other people's. One of the first things I did was working on playing the guitar while singing, getting those two entities to work together in harmony, playing guitar and using my voice to create melodies over them... I understand how that works; you have a bassline and a melody, I get that, but I don't understand how your mind can work itself around all those other instruments and how they all come together.

ON NEVER THINKING ABOUT ANYTHING AT ALL (AND LOVING ON EACH OTHER)

N: You are sort of a genius at writing things that fit so perfectly with your voice.
J: It comes very effortlessly and spontaneously. How do you work when you have to do whole arrangements for an orchestra? Isn't that too much? It's over the top, I think. Do you see, like a colour palette?
N: I like to think: "What is the emotional pull of the number of minutes that I have to do this in?" Let's say I have twelve minutes for orchestra. What can happen in twelve minutes? Can we go on a trip? Can we walk? Can we tell a story?
J: This is different from me. I never think about anything at all.

"That's our headline right there. 'I never think about anything at all.'"

J: I think you should only follow your instinct. Just write a song. Don't think about if it's sad or happy or fast or slow. Sorry, I'm just curious about coming from the school environment and the classical world. You've been in Juilliard, you've studied for ten years, all the formulas and stuff. How do you think about music? Is it in the spontaneous way?
N: It's always an ecstatic process. For me, school is just a technique to learn how to do certain things.

J: Exactly! That's exactly the right way to think about it.

N: The thing you get from school is: you don't learn how to think, you learn how to sew, how to cut the string, to do the kinda practical stuff. It's practical and mechanical. You learn and you learn. Some teachers at school will teach you how to focus your ideas, for instance. The biggest question for me has always been, always, whatever I'm doing is this, this thing I'm working on, is it preferable to silence?

If someone tells me to write twelve minutes for orchestra, whatever I make had better to be so great that it deserves to exist. If people could spend twelve minutes sitting around in their house and have a better time, then I'll cut it. You know, a lot of music is not preferable to silence.

J: I also have this debate with classical composers and people in the classical world, about their kind of music and how it seems formulaic to me. They're so learned and schooled, they kinda fall into this rut of classical composing... You, however, seem different. You are so young. And you like to work with different kinds of music. It seems so generous to me, so wide, so broad...
N: For me, music has to always be an ecstatic process. It just has to be.

J: Why do you work so well in all the genres? Most people stick to pure classical or pure avant-garde.

N: I think if your attitude is right, you can do anything. It's like travel. How can you have a life in Iceland and New York and London or wherever. If you think about genres as different countries, it gets easier to travel. Everyone still has to pee, they have foods and menus and rituals of saying hi. I always think about genres as non-existent, really. For me, the whole musical spectrum is one big Schengen area.

J: I love that. It's so fucking true.
N: Thinking about genres is like asking someone... pretend your mom is from India and your dad is from Iceland or wherever, and you move to New York and you're just a young family trying to make work and you make dinner, you have kids, and whenever people come over they talk about it being fusion-y. "Ohh... this is like India meets Iceland" and you're all like "No, it's just what we like making for the kids."

It's a natural process for me, even when I'm thinking on a piece and planning in advance, I stop short of deciding upon the actual genre of it or whatnot.

J: That's really important.
N: To be fair, there's something fun to be gained from it all. Planning some things out. One of the thrills of pop music – even though the creation is spontaneous – is that there's a lot of work that happens afterwards. Post-production, as you know. So in pop music, you guys have an army of people that think about all those things for

months after the music's recorded – and even record on top of it – whereas in classical music, you just take the notes and play them.

J: This is very true.
N: All the stuff that happened after the tracking on your new album was as important as what happened during the tracking. You changed songs around, cut them. Really, what happens in classical music is that you do all that work beforehand.

J: It's very true actually. Say a classical musician writes a piece, he doesn't even think about the recording. The recording is just documentation, you record it exactly how it appears on the sheet music, then publish it. Not like us, who recorded strings, brass and wind separately, we fucked it all up afterwards, cut it up and worked it...

ON LEAVING SPACE

N: For me, that was my biggest interest coming here and starting to work with Valgeir. He said: "Why don't you just make an album?" and I was like, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

So we made an album and it was a revolution for me. Just ingraining myself into that kind of work method, getting to think about things both before and after. Before that time, I was literally in this weird position where the only documentation of my music were live recordings of performances from 1998, just cassette tapes that people had recorded and that was it, forever. Valgeir approached me asking if we shouldn't do it in the studio, so we could do stuff to it afterwards. It was a genius, novel idea.

J: When you record your classical piece, do you write it all down and spell it out in notes, perfectly? The musicians play, Valgeir records and you change everything around afterwards?
N: Yeah, everything.

J: What do you mean everything? Do you fuck it up? Reverse it? Change the parts around?
N: Yeah, but nothing too crude. For both the albums I've made with Valgeir, I've built in a space for him to do things. I'll write a piece and leave this huge hole between voice and bass for him to pick up and fill up and have fun with. You can combine things in a way you wouldn't if you thought too hard in advance. I think this is slowly changing for composers, Daniel Bjarnason's album is a good example of something that's thought out and written out perfectly, while still adhering to the tenets of post-production in a way.

J: Indeed, the good thing about Nico's arrangements on my album is the space he left. He didn't cover the whole songs in flourish.

N: And you know, my attitude was always to turn it up, turn it down, fade in, fade out, I always try and provide ingredients rather than answers. Occasionally I would say things like, "you should do this or that or double this," but there was no ego associated with my notes. You were free to disregard them if you wanted.

J: That's probably Nico's best quality, his lack of ego. Nothing in how he works indicates a huge ego. Ha! Ego Mueller!
N: It was funny. You said one of the things, I thought: "If they cut it, I will be sad." Lucky for me, none of those bits got cut!

ON STING AND YOGA AND MONEY

J: He'd be in the studio, sitting with the engineer going "oh yeah, turn up the flutes on this baby!" I was like "What the fuck? Hopefully he's not going to be around when we mix this thing..."

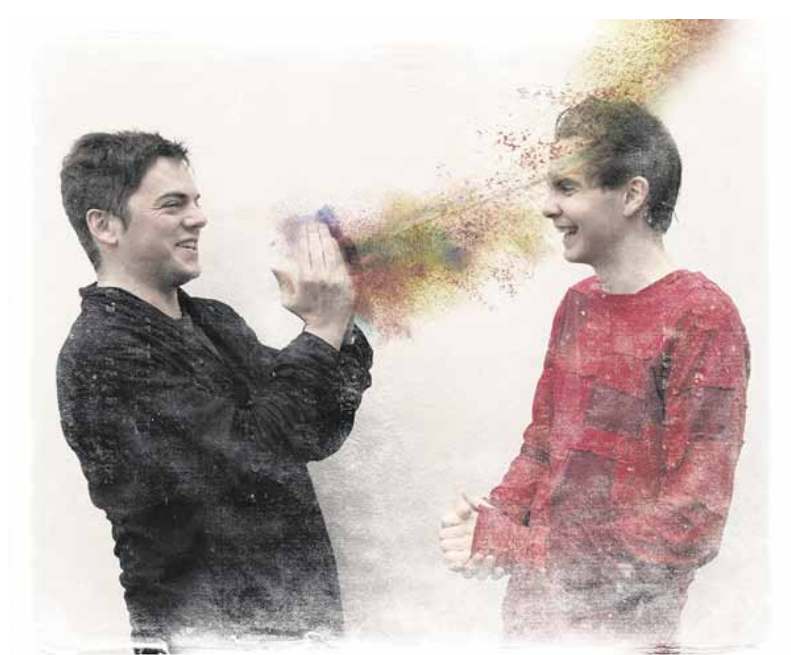
N: I wanted to make sure everything I gave you was perfect, so when you wanted to start fucking with it, it couldn't hurt. One of the things that freaks me out about pop music is that sometimes the quality of the recordings is not good and sometimes the playing is bad. The worst thing is the strings. Synth strings.

J: Sting uses synth strings. What the fuck is up with that?
N: Indeed. He has so much money.

J: Sting is full of money and yoga and he doesn't use real strings? It's weird. A lot of pop arrangements now are made for samplers rather than actual players. This makes a boring, poorly sounding recording and all the violists are unemployed. In any case, I wanted to make sure everything I gave you was in tiptop condition.

J: Actually, the demos sounded really good.
N: The recordings did too. I was aggressive about hiring expensive players for this project, hahaha!

J: I KNOW THAT! [glares at Nico]
N: As you may or may not have sensed from me, I thought it really important to



work with people that I could feel comfortable with, and that share some of my attitudes. This makes the work a much more pleasant process.

J: It was actually really cool. Nico knows a certain group of players that he really prefers to work with, folks he loves and knows can deliver the job. He ordered them in, we got some Dunkin Donuts coffee and everyone got pumped recording that stuff. He had the whip on them real tight.

N: Working with players you know and trust is important.

J: It is important if you're a conductor, conducting a group of people. Everyone likes to be controlled, people like that, and you are a controller. You manage to control them and be funny and pleasant at the same time you are being controlling and getting things done, that quality you have is really awesome.

N: It helps when you know the people. You can say something curt and really awful, just lay it on and it's OK.

J: I know. You managed to loosen up everything while being firm on the whip the whole time.

N: For me it's awful being in conduction. Being a young conductor is so awful... for your album, it wasn't so scary, but say I'm conducting a film score...

J: How is that?
N: It's fine. Girl, it's fiine. Everyone gives you these stern looks, as if you have to prove yourself. In England, especially, you can really struggle. 'Cause England is England.

J: They want an old geezer, a big formal guy?
N: Yeah. And for you're not some old geezer, they want you to, like, totally dominate them with your brilliance. English people are such a bottom, it's crazy. What they want is for you to go in there with fireworks and shoot lasers from your fingers and be like "Girl, you get on the floor and you PLAY that cello!" and you just sort of... Hahaha. I sorta had to lash my tongue out at them in to get things moving. I'm looking forward to being over thirty.

ON NEGATIVE REVIEWS

"I only ever read bad reviews about you, Nico, on your own website. And often the articles will be all upset with how young you are..."

N: I only ever put up my bad ones. I get in so much trouble with the classical press. We're fucked no matter what we do. But press stuff is so secondary.
J: I learned very early on not to read anything about your work. Nico is probably still reading his reviews... I never read anything. I never go to my own website or anything. I have to live in the old bubble.

"What was the last review you read?"

J: The last one I read was probably ten years ago. NME had been really loving on Sigur rós. And they really love to hype bands to death before turning on them and crushing them. When we first came out in the UK they really loved on us, and

then a year later I read a review there. "Oh Sigur rós, it's really boring. Like Pink Floyd on steroids. Really really boring and too long..." I went all "uhmm..." with that.

N: I learn a lot from bad reviews. Sometimes they say the very worst things you've thought about yourself.

J: It can be so unfair, though, that I kinda don't like to read them at all. I like to get reviews from friends. Like Alex, my boyfriend, he is a hardcore critic, telling me exactly what doesn't work and why. I like getting word from my friends rather than some asshole reporter who's really grumpy that day and hates everything. You know?

N: I've never really gotten terrible reviews. I get a lot of nasty reviews and internet comments, though, but it's never something I haven't thought about myself. But that's just a kind of gay self-loathing. The worst stuff that's been said has never been outside of what I've thought of myself, which I like. There's a certain consistency to it.

ON SHARING SIMILAR ATTITUDES AND REHEARSING A BAND OF FIVE PEOPLE

"Do you think you share similar attitudes to music? Do you imagine you experience and convey it in comparable ways?"

J: I think definitely.
N: I would say definitely, yes.
J: I was really happy when I worked with Nico for the first time, when we met in my apartment. We sat on the floors, with a pillow, and I just was enthralled by the spontaneity of it all, the no bullshit approach. I always thought classical people had to be boring. Too learned, too thought out or whatever. It was so refreshing to be exposed to Nico and how he wrote five arrangements in one night.

N: It was such a good night. A good example is the song that's now called Sinking Friendships and that whole bubbling ecstasy that's in there. How fun it was, just the two of us on the piano playing it. You taught me the chords and I immediately latched on [starts mimicking a very, very fast piano player].

J: Did you learn anything from me? Or like anything that happened?
N: Yeah, definitely. First of all the songs themselves were fabulous, but I also love your whole attitude. You have good attitude about figure things out, and which order they need to be figured out in. You know when you should work on certain things, which is a quality I love. "Let's deal with that bridge later..." You know what your strengths are, not just in general but also at the moment.

Then this last week of rehearsing the band was kinda weird, dealing with different perceptions of how things should be done.

J: That was kind of hard...
N: It was fine. I was there to be an asshole. But you were a foreign element to the proceedings, and you had to keep things going and working. It was interesting be-

"I think people should be more aware of what they put in their bodies – music or food – it's your fucking fuel, it's what keeps you going."

cause Nico came over to help us with our rehearsals and help the piano player learn his parts. Usually – I'm sorry, I might be talking BS out of my ass here – but usually in the classical world everything is written down and you really just have to rehearse it again and again until it gets flowing. With a band of five people, you can't really do that. You don't know where exactly you're headed, but you know you want it to be really good. You need a space to play around in, time to noodle and twiddle and be really lazy, just doing this and that.

N: Right, which I don't really know about.
J: So that work was maybe difficult, but also cool. It's like our major difference is that Nico comes from the classical world and I... don't.

N: I believe in notation, and I believe in parts.
J: ...and I believe in everything being practical and fast!

ON BJÖRK, AND NOT BEING AN ASSHOLE

J: Playing in a band is the only thing I've done in my life, ever, and we need this time to be stupid, to play around, be silly, hang out and noodle...

N: ...and I was all like, "are we done yet?"
J: Nico on the clock: "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?"
N: That was good for me to witness, the noodling.

J: I think it's healthy. And it's also healthy for me. I should speak up sometimes, I feel.

N: It's also interesting because a band is a diplomatic project whereas this thing is your shit – your actual name's on the project.

J: I know, and I always forget that. I don't want to be the asshole that orders people what to do. I don't want to be that asshole, so I wind up not speaking up. I'm afraid I might have to start to speak up more.

N: In a situation like this, it's where I've always felt the model for the solo artist should be that she really gets what she wants. That there should be nothing happening on that stage that she does not like. A good example of this is Björk.

J: It's amazing that through doing this project, I developed this crazy respect for Björk for the first time.

N: Going solo is hard. It's so much different from being in a band. You're not just the singer anymore, you're the artist.

J: It's so fucking hard.
N: And her ass has been in it for 35 years, getting the best ingredients from everyone

in the world and putting them together. Really well, I might add.

J: It's so funny, I've been in a band with four other people for sixteen years. It's so diplomatic and democratic — we make every decision together. And if you get tired of some aspect or element, one of the other guys will take it over and you'll not have to think about it. This is so different, having to be focused the whole time, making decisions, pretending you know what's best for the project. It's difficult, and as I said, it made me really respect Björk and what she's been doing. This is what she has to deal with every day.

N: Since she was like seventeen, that bitch has been working it.

J: I have really big respect for Björk. Who-ah.

N: As do I. Remember when we e-mailed her in the middle of the night. That was fun.

I always think about her process as being this thing that involves knowing. She'll send people to all the corners of the Earth searching for ingredients, then she kicks everyone out and cooks for herself. She has this amazing ability and talent to make things awesome with the available resources. The best resources, really.

It's all about the right ingredients. And you can always get better at that process. My mother goes to the store not knowing what to cook, she'll just buy the stuff that looks good and mixes it all together into something amazing. And that's kind of how you have to be, a mix of instinct and insight. We might be eating this cauliflower anchovy thing; even if it sounds fucked up you know it'll be genius by accident.

ON BEING SANE

-Do you believe music has a purpose; does it have one for you?

J: I can see Nico twittering there, he really wants to talk. But I'll answer first. I think music is all about keeping you sane. Writing music, writing songs and stuff, that's also about keeping you sane, about keeping you fulfilled and happy and it can reinforce the belief that life has some meaning. It's really simple.

N: Yeah, quite so. I was basically going to say the same thing, but forty times longer. For me, the purpose was established the first time I ever got full body Goosebumps. I was eleven and singing in a choir, a piece by William Bird.

J: I have to go to the toilet.

-Nico, could you describe our surroundings while Jónsi finds his release?

N: We're at the Leather Bar in Reykjavik, sitting at the entrance to the fitting room, which is currently not being used. Go poke your head in there and make sure. Over there's a gas mask and a bear pride flag, and a Scandinavian Leather Man Week ad. To the right is the cage. And there's a pretty good movie running on the TV in the corner. Jónsi's been watching it the whole time.

J: [back from the men's room] I was actually very obviously trying not to watch it.

N: Yeah yeah, lemme go [walks off to the bathroom].

[Jónsi flips through a porno mag, looking for the cover model, which looked enticing. We find him, and he is pleasing to the eye. Nico returns.]

ON BEING A GAY NERD

J: I really want to ask Nico one question.

N: What's the question, then?

J: So, being gay, how has that affected your music making and your being a composer or whatever?

N: I mean, the short answer is not at all...

J: Really?

N: ... and also all of the time. It's kind of a combination. I love to think it has nothing to do with anything, but the reasons I make music all stem to thinking about myself as an eleven year old singing in a choir, thinking about my very lonely preteen gay boy self, singing in a choir.

J: Did you get any priest action?

N: No, there was no priest action. But I remember how excited I was to know music at that time. And I address my music to that kid, always. Maybe slightly smarter a kid, and slightly more ecstatic. Still that same one. I want my music always to be that rapturous, how I felt it then.

J: Were you a nerd when you were young?

N: I was such a nerd.

J: Really? In what way? Did you just stay at home and write songs all day?

N: No, I got into music kind of late. But I had oddball parents, and I read a lot. I much preferred reading to talking to people. I think, for me at least, being gay imposes a guilty sort of loneliness on your

social life.

J: Exactly, exactly. This same thing happened to me actually. I grew up in a small town outside Reykjavik, Mosfellsbær, and I didn't know any gays or lesbians until I was something like 21 years old. That's kinda when I came out of the closet. Until you come out, you have this urge to be happy and fulfilled, but the only way to do that is to create something. You have to make things for yourself, to draw, play music, paint or whatever. You have this urge to meet another boy or kiss someone or hug them, but you can't, because you don't know anybody. You're stuck in a small town.

N: And even if you did know someone, it felt weird.

J: Yes. I kept making this big mistake of falling in love with my friends. A classic gay thing.

N: You mustn't fall in love with your friends. There is a built in loneliness to the gay experience, a very intense one. Just by nature of the number of things, it's so lonely.

J: In any case, I think being gay has affected me a lot as a musician. It is focal in a lot of my music making and... [trails off, eyes glued to the TV screen in the corner].

-Now, THAT was a cumshot.

ON RETHINKING IT ALL

N: We were all talking about the gay experience and the straight person mentions the cumshot! Ha! Alright. I've always felt like gay musicians have this obligation to make something that's sooooo good. For me, that served as quality control, a little. I felt that as a gay man, I had an obligation to make good music. It's served me well.

J: Yeah, that's definitely good in the long run. But kind of hard to have on your shoulders nonetheless.

N: I've always felt like everything I did has to be just perfect. It's also something. All my parent's friends were gay; everyone was gay around me, growing up.

J: It's so funny, you grew up in a totally different landscape. You were just gay all the way, you didn't grow up being the weird guy in the family. I was exactly the opposite, growing up in the countryside, really straight parents, really straight family, straight friends...

N: But the good news for you is that even if you're growing up in a place where everyone is gay, it's still fucking lonely and weird. Which I think is good. The best, in fact. I don't know, but it was just as weird to have a million gay people to be with. I didn't want to be just like them. There were also generational differences...

J: It worked out for me in the end. I knew I was gay, and had like this special thing for boys, and I fell in love with all my friends. I knew there was a definite difference between greater society and myself. This made it necessary for me to rethink everything, the whole of society, the whole world. The straight movies I'd been seeing my whole life, the rules I'd been taught and my whole life. Everything. I had to rethink it all. I think this is a very healthy practice for us.

N: It is. You get to re-evaluate all the children's stories, all the moral codes... Actually, I'm still unravelling, all the stuff you've been taught by straight people, can't be trusted. Most people's parents — at least in our generation — will be straight. Can you listen to their stories, honestly?

"Did you get any priest action?"

ON EVERYTHING GETTING DARKER

J: I feel like being gay and being a musician helped me a lot actually. I think I wouldn't have made as much music as I did if I weren't gay; it really created an urge to create to be fulfilled, to be happy.

And I remember the time until I turned sixteen. It was such an innocent and carefree time. I didn't know anything. I had friends, for sure, but I only had shallow conversations until I met the first boy in my life, my best friend who I fell in love with. He introduced me to the feeling of speaking heart to heart with someone, to being really close and say exactly how you're feeling. Before I had that, the conversations weren't deep.

N: You had to keep it one level removed, so no one will find out.

J: Of course, that changed my whole life perspective, everything got darker from that point, and more serious. More real. More you had to think of. Before that, I was so carefree. I will always remember

those first sixteen years of my life. Care-free and fun. Total freedom.

ON DELICIOUS MOMENTS, ALWAYS

N: Do you feel like you're sometimes trying to recreate that period, the carefreeness.

J: Probably in some way. It's such a beautiful moment. Such an ecstatic, carefree moment. No bullshit — no worries.

N: No sixteen layers of not speaking your mind. That's often what I'm trying to accomplish. Getting back to that first moment, right before that first moment, and write a score for that. That's the parts of my music people like, and dislike. It's an uncomfortable topic to exist in that landscape, before. Just delicious moments, always.

J: It is so strong in everybody, everybody loves their instinct and follows it, but they get caught up in society, slowly you get caught up in this stampede of information and bullshit. You get caught up and your true self gets lost.

N: Thinking about this, what's funny is that I feel like now you're living a life that's as out and about as one could hope for, but it's also quite a composed life. It's good. You have this insane dietary thing... [Jónsi adheres to a strict raw food diet].

J: I know. The thing is that it's just really healthy and fun. With everything you do, if you live for it, if you don't listen to anything...

N: I listen to everything, you don't listen to anything.

J: But you only like what you like. This is true for me as well. I think people should be more aware of what they put in their bodies — music or food — it's your fucking fuel, it's what keeps you going.

N: I only buy expensive food. If you're paying an exorbitant amount of money for something, chances are it's good.

ON BUYING EXPENSIVE CLOTHES

J: I have to make everything from scratch, like Nico's mother. Everything I eat. I can't go to a store and buy ketchup; I have to make it from scratch. Not mustard; I have to make it from ground mustard seeds, I've done that. I make burgers and stuff like that. A lot of your energy goes into making food when you're a raw-foodist, but it's worth it and I think everyone should be doing it.

N: Part of the reasons why I dress like I do is if you buy really expensive clothes, chances are it's not slave labour. It's not made by eighteen children in a Thai basement but some designer in Japan somewhere.

J: Nico only dresses in black. I never wear anything black. It's a conscious choice. Black is no colour at all, an absence of colour. I try and stay away from it.

N: I used to wear orange a lot. I had this whole orange phase. I'm branching out from black right now actually. I'm working with a really good blue, and if someone were to make me a really good dark red I would like that. But no one will make it.

It's a tough process — the whole thing is a disaster. An expensive disaster.

J: Have you talked to Bárð from Aftur? She could make it. She's making all our costumes for the tour and it's been great working with her. I don't like spending money on them. I'm Icelandic in that way, I don't waste money on clothes. It's funny for me, when Bárð is sewing my stage outfits, I try to make her do clothes that I can wear in daily life. To save money [laughs].

ON WHY GAY PEOPLE MAKE BETTER MUSIC

-Returning to an earlier topic: do you guys think gay people make different music from straight folks?

N: Much, much better music. Because why? Because it's informed. The gay person does not have an entitlement to life, rather a need to make the world into her image.

J: The gayness forces you to make stuff. I think it's so fucked... If you're going to feel good in this society we live in, you have to make something good. So you can feel good.

N: In my experience, straight composers get away with not thinking too hard about things. "It is or it is not, yada yada..." just... blah. Whereas — and there are of course many exceptions — I hold true that gay people have to make their own garden, kind of, their own vocabulary, rocks and trees and plants.

-Is modern composition a big gay scene?

N: No, and I think all of my favourite composers are actually straight. Philip Glass, Steve Reich and John Adams are not the gay composers. Benjamin Britten is the high watermark of how music can make me feel. He made music... he was a homosexual and he made the most exclusive music that resonates so specifically with me. I don't know. It's a weird thing. All I know is that I am becoming more severe recently about the importance of being gay. In America at least, it's crazy. You can't be in the army if you're a homo; if you're gay you're not good enough to die for your country.

J: Actually, my big gripe with being gay in Iceland is that I can't donate blood. It's so fucking stupid.

N: It's the same shit in America. I tried donating after 9/11 and they were asking "Have you had anal sex with a man in the last twelve months?" My jaw dropped. I was all like "FUCK YOU! You had sex with your dumb husband in the last twelve months, I presume.

J: This rule is a fucking joke. They only ask gay guys if they had anal sex. They don't care if you're a straight person and you've fucked every woman you know in the ass. That's fine.

N: If you one time put it in some guys pooper, you can't save someone else's life.

ON BEING FIRED BY COURTNEY LOVE. AND ICESAVE.

-For the common reader, could you explain the difference between songwriting and arranging. Can, for instance, a Nico Muhlly fan buy Jónsi's album for the arrangements?

J: It was definitely fun for me to write the songs and then get Nico to bring it to another level, for me it was amazing to experience.

N: I'll say that someone might recognize my footprints on the album, but it's definitely not my album. As I said before, my job as an arranger is to make Jónsi look fabulous. It's to make the singer

[a grinning Jónsi snaps on a latex glove from a box of complimentary that rests on our counter]

look great and sound great. Some arrangers try and take credit for writing, which I would never do. All I am trying to do is make you look good. It's not my shit, it's your shit. I've just put this costume on it.

"This rule is a fucking joke. They only ask gay guys if they had anal sex. They don't care if you're a straight person and you've fucked every woman you know in the ass. That's fine."

-I got told to ask you this, Nico. What's your relationship with Courtney Love?

N: I think she fired me. I did a bunch of arrangements for her and it was a big fiasco. I'm pretty sure she fired me. Through Twitter? No, she hired me through Twitter, but hasn't called back after we recorded.

-What do you guys think about Icesave?

J: I have no clue what's happening in Icesave. N: I do I listen to BBC World Service every day and e-mail people about it. No, I have no idea. I think people shouldn't have invested in another country's shady shit. It was like giving Nigerian internet people your money, really. Did you see the return rate? It was made up! It was a pool party — everybody was cheering all this easy, easy money. It seemed too good to be true, which it of course was.

The night slowly descends into even more chaos. Folks hug. We go fetch another bottle of champagne. The fitting room gets occupied all of the sudden. Members of Jónsi's band join us. At the very end of the night's dictaphone recording, I later discover an eerie call to arms, Blair Witch-style. It sounds like it was shouted by the pair in unison, although there is no way of telling: "GLOVES ARE OFF, BITCHES!"

