

Devendra Banhart has been releasing sublime, chimerical Alan Watts-rides-shotgun-with-Caetano Veloso records since his 2002 debut The Charles C. Leary. It's music that needs to be fitted with a gastric band to squeeze into definition. So how do you interview a man in a house with nothing but bookshelves and a bed? You don't. You ask his long-time husband, collaborator, artist and Transparent actor friend Mel Shimkovitz to and you get back animal husbandry, gender reconciliation and tortilla exorcism. Lovely.

Devendra Banhart: So this is a Saturday afternoon. Two pals nurse a hangover, overlooking a taco, pastrami, chicken and burrito joint in a small neighbourhood of mostly middle-class Mexican families and queers. My name is Devendra, and I'm with my husband Mel Shimkovitz. Mel...

Mel Shimkovitz: Aloha.

DB: We don't drink. I have a collective hangover, from my neighbourhood having so many people going out on a bender. But I'd much rather talk about the insignificance of an aura.

MS: For the record Devendra's just ordered a lentil bowl which he orders off the menu wherever he goes whether they have it or not. And I've got an Earl Grey de la crème, avec crème, and avec honey.

DB: My life is one big cameo by Danny DeVito in *Get Shorty*. What's happening today on this beautiful last Saturday of the month?

In conversation with
Mel Shimkovitz
Photography
Lauren Dukoff

All clothing: Devendra's and Mel's own

MS: Well, it's a full moon tonight but I've just finished my cycle, so, things are a little off...

DB: She's literally dropping tampons. She's the Johnny Appleseed of tampons.

MS: It's how I find my way back to my car.

DB: So it's a super moon tonight, and we're quite excited. Earlier, I was reading some of Harold Budd's poetry. Heavenly Monkey Publishing has been putting out Harold's poetry and it's very exciting. I finally got my first copy in the mail today. Tonight's a special night for Mel.

MS: First we are going to get chairs re-upholstered. I have a chair but Devendra has a *really* special chair.

DB: I do, I do, I do. It's so special because it's featured in one of these short films that Mel's gonna be screening tonight at one of the first parties for her publication called *How Many Virgins?* Mel and her collaborative partner - one of my favourite artists - Amy von Harrington are gonna be showing these short films they made, including a new one that's inspired by the film *Elvira*. Tell us about some of these films. I've been describing them as mostly philosophical, err, extra-sensory, taco-rich, er, er, what?

MS: They're basically like post-modern experiential phantasms, not of tacos, but of the experience of eating a taco. So they're messy, they don't make sense, every time you look at them you get something else, you don't know what you're eating cause it's wrapped in some hallucinatory flour tortilla. It gets all over your hands, it runs down onto your shirt, you ruin your best shirt. Here in LA we just have taco trucks so there's never anywhere to sit, so your shoes get super dirty. They're collaborative works, this is a mid-career survey of the last two decades of videos that I've made with Amy von Harrington, and tonight we're showing a curated selection as well as a world premier of *Melvina*.

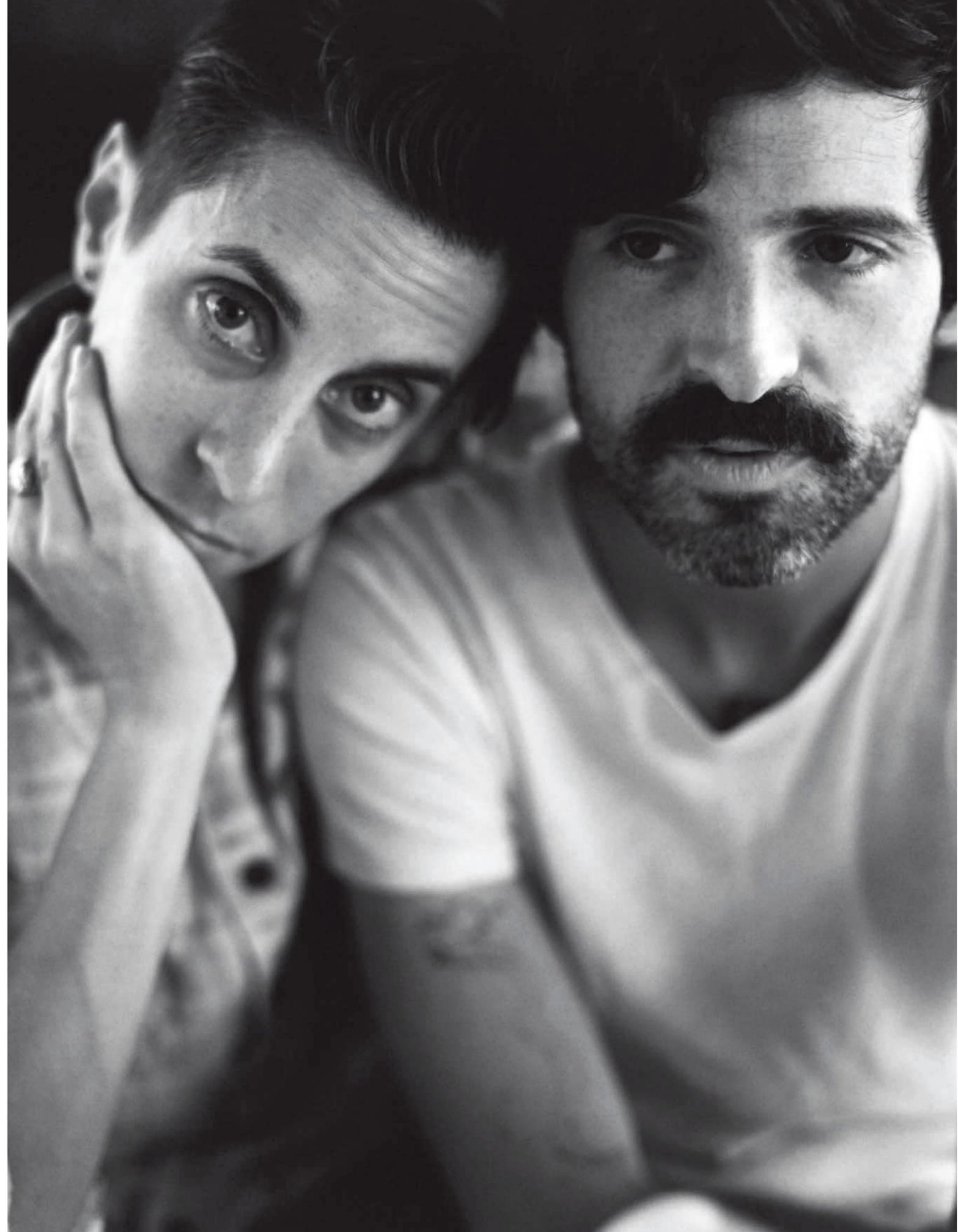
DB: I love titles. Can you tell me what the titles of the other short films are?

MS: We have one called *Two Bags Douche It Out*. Another one is *I, Dummy* - that's the ventriloquist one. There's another one called *Manoquin* - it's our take on the movie *Mannequin*, but in this one it has to do with a gay hustler where only the hand comes to life.

DB: Oh my God. So good. I've actually seen that one, I can't wait to see it again. It's brilliant. I can't wait for that to be turned into a feature film.

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MS: It's a re-mastered version, the director's cut.

DB: Oh wow really? Is there commentary?

MS: I will send that to you. It's me whispering how shitty it is, into your ear.

DB: You've got to do that for my record, as well, please.

MS: What is this record and when does it come out?

DB: Well, it's being done alongside my first foray into soundtrack work. So Josiah Steinbeck, Noah Georgeson and I are now working on my record here in LA. I don't know what number it is. We just finished the music to a film called *Joshy* by Jeff Baena and that kind of paved the way to the soundtrack that I'm currently working on for a film called *The Sangres*. Which I think you know a little bit about?

MS: Oh, you mean *The Sangres* – the film written and directed by, and starring me?

DB: That's the one. So it's true, Mel actually also has a film that is in pre-production at the moment and I'm doing the music for it.

MS: It's a real film. It's a love letter to Devendra. A love letter about friendship.

DB: That's right and my soundtrack is just that.

MS: It's about animal husbandry.

DB: Animal husbandry, gender reconciliation, tortilla exorcism, chipotle... umm...

MS: ...chipotle transcendence.

DB: Everything you want in a love letter. And mostly, total hopelessness. Joe Steinbeck and I also have a radio show called *The Sportsmen*. It's just ads, we promote each other to each other, it's totally natural.

MS: Alright this is boring, let's get to the gossip. Devendra has a whole list here of high-minded things that we're gonna talk about, but really all I wanna talk about is girls.

DB: I will respond with a quote by Ram Dass. Here's the quote: "Compassion, simply stated, is leaving other people alone." So that's where I am in that realm of my own sexuality and my own dance with other beings and other people. Just trying to take that particular definition of compassion, generally at the moment.

MS: That's so beautiful. It's such a coincidence because I was thinking earlier today of this quote by my guru *Ron* Dass, who simply stated, "Compassion is using a condom."

DB: Right. *Compassion*.

MS: Yeah. Condom-passion is pulling out.

DB: Colon-passion.

MS: Colon-passion is doing an enema everyday.

DB: I had a thought that being an adult is about having a relationship with your own sensitivity and then knowing where to place that sensitivity.

MS: Hang on, I have to write that down.

DB: In a weird way, I feel like we're just surrounded by this insane propaganda that tries to push away all sensitivity. But what it means to be an adult is understanding that sensitivity, knowing that it's this presence in your life. Knowing that it's this tremendous tool. Just like another tremendous tool of course is appreciation. I mean if I had a kid I'd say, hey, you've got a superpower and it's called appreciation. All those things – I like, I don't like, I hate, I love – no, no, no, those are people who don't know their superpower, which is appreciation.

Speaking of kids though, I am talking with the one human being in my life, other than someone from the past who I was actually going to marry, that I've really talked about having a kid with.

MS: Well we're married, so.

DB: We are married, and it's –

MS: Since gay marriage is legal now, I'm allowed to get married.

DB: But do we wanna have a kid? You know what I mean. I think we would have a fantastic family. If anything, someone would wash the dishes and mop the floor.

MS: I mean, here are the pros. You can con after this, but the pros are: you and I just having a kid together would maybe create some karmic peace between Venezuela and its Nazi roots, you know? Cause I'm so Jewish and you're so Venezuelan, and I think that would help.

DB: I will say, you know, I've never played in Venezuela.

MS: Really?

DB: And, funnily enough, the person that plays bass in my band with me, Todd Dahlhoff – and his wife Cynthia – are across the street. I can see them walking across the street right now, how funny is that?

MS: So Devendra's stepping outside to say hi to his bassist right now, which means I can say *anything*. Here's the thing, he's just been *begging* me to have a baby with him, and it's because he's already partially retired, he fancies himself as an eighty-year-old. If I'm gender-queer, Devendra's age-queer. It means he's very old or wants to be. I think he feels like if he had a kid, it would be his ultimate excuse for never going out anymore. Not leaving the house, not touring, nothing. So, I'm considering it, but only because he's got the most beautiful eyelashes. I think to have a kid with eyelashes like that would be just incredible. He's back.

DB: What have you been saying?

MS: Nothing.

DB: Do you wanna tell them how we met? This is a friendship interview, this is about our friendship.

DB: Yeah, this is a friendship interview.

MS: We took loving photos together. We did a John and Yoko Ono photoshoot with Lauren Dukoff. How long have we known each other? When did we meet?

DB: I don't know, I – forever, forever. Long enough to be talking about a kid.

MS: Yeah, I'd say like ten years. We've shared some ex-girlfriends.

DB: That we have, that we have. Here, let's wrap this up. Look out for Mel in *Transparent* Season 2, I'm working on a record. I think that's why we're doing this. Right?

