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OMAR'S WORLD

Omar Apollo Says He's Finishing His 'Best Album Yet'

The alt-R&B singer tells us about getting drunk with SZA, blasting Beyoncé's 4, and refusing to take people's opinions too seriously

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JOSH WHITE FOR ROLLING STONE

Omar Apollo is looking at himself through Zoom as he tries on the beige Sherpa jacket he just bought. “You fuck with it?” he asks.

It’s hard not to fuck with everything the Mexican American alt-R&B star does. Apollo dropped his debut album, *Ivory*, in April 2022, then blew up with the ultra-sentimental song “Evergreen,” and followed that success by touring with SZA last year. Recently, he’s been dipping into fashion. (A massive billboard of him dripped in the luxury designer Loewe looms over Sunset Boulevard in L.A.)

Apollo is back in L.A. these days, putting the finishing touches on his upcoming album, out in the summer. He dropped his album’s first single “Spite” last Friday, and he’s experimenting with jazz, house, and other genres.

He tells me it’s the best music he’s ever made. And, nah, he’s not just saying that.

How are you?

I’m good. I’ve been posted up, finishing the album. We’re mixing, and I’m really excited. How are you?

Good. I just got back from visiting family in Durango, Mexico.

Duranguense! I know the dance. You're supposed to act like you got a penny stuck in between your cheeks or something.

Your knees.

Oh, your knees? I remember my mom would teach me how to do that. I was in *baile folklórico* when I was younger. It was zapateado and dances like that. The girls had the little clicks in their hands and the big dresses. The guys would have sombreros and mariachi-looking pants.

How are you feeling about this new album? I read that you are angrier on it.

Angrier, definitely, on the single "Spite." Now it's back to my old longing-for-love vibe, but it's reimagined. I got in with Teo Halm. He's been my friend since I was 17 years old. We met when I worked at Guitar Center.

We reconnected on "Evergreen." We flew to London for two or three months last year. It was really no breaks. It was cool to get into that state of mind where everything is about making music we both love and connect to. The album doesn't feel like it's a bunch of songs put together. It's a sequence that is made to be listened to front to back. That's what I love about it. The songs, the writing, the narrative, everything about it is just from someone who has progressed in music. You can just tell.

In one of the tracks, you sing about grief. I've heard before that grief is the highest, most intense form of love.

It's such a complex feeling because you could feel grief for someone who's passed away or grief for someone you have heartbreak over. That song, in particular, is one of my favorites on the album. I took my time and was trying to give an imagery and a feeling, and a temperature and a light. Even the writing is kind of psychedelic.

There's one house-infused song that feels like it came from left field.

I was trying to paint an image. I want to be able to set a scene the way that a film would. I wanted something people could just be at the club with, because when you think of my music, you don't think about the club. So I'm like, "Fuck, I need some club shit." But it was just how I was feeling at the time, in London especially. I was going to so many parties.

Who were some of your inspirations on here?

It was, like, Kate Bush, Giorgio Moroder, Labi Siffre. Let me pull out the playlist: Daniel Johnston, he's sick. Jeff Buckley, Lana Del Rey, for sure. I've also been listening to a lot of Beyoncé.

Which album?

4. That album's insane.

During your Musicians on Musicians interview with Lindsey Buckingham, he said, "There's nothing wrong with taking external input, but at the end of the day, you can't let that be a driving force." You seemed to connect to that.

When people tell me what they think, I'll tell them I disagree with them and then tell them why. Teo's a Taurus, so he gets me, but we would bump heads a lot, but that's what it is when you spend that much time together. I trusted everything he was doing and he trusted everything I was doing. That's how it should be when you're making music. It shouldn't be a bunch of opinions, because then it doesn't become art. It becomes other people's art, and then it becomes an act of service, which I don't think art is. I think art is a reflection of your soul and emotions.

I remember I had a conversation that kind of rubbed me the wrong way. I thought, "It doesn't matter what your idea and image of me is. What matters is if I can wake up and I can be excited to go and perform the songs and be excited to put them out." If I feel strongly about it and I feel like I exhausted every avenue to get to where we're at, and I feel proud, then I think that that's what's important. Those outside opinions can fuck with you a lot, and you just have to take it with a grain of salt.

What sort of opinions do you ask for?

I'll ask very specific things. I'd be like, "I'm going to play you 20 songs, pick your favorite." That's it. I don't want to know why it's your favorite. Just tell me which one. I think when you're in the creative process, it's so delicate that anything could damage your energy toward it. That's why it's not good to take in a lot of opinions. I actually have a friend who literally won't play me anything, and he has been working on a whole album and he won't show me any of it. He's on my album too.

What can you say about the Live For Me EP you dropped in October?

Live For Me was definitely all discovery. It was music that I was making to get to where I wanted to go. It's like a time capsule. I bought both of the pieces of art from the painter, Doron Langberg. They're just up on my wall and it's just a reminder every day, like 'Dang. That's the coolest thing I've done for myself: When you execute your ideas and get to see them in real life, that's a good, fulfilling feeling that I just keep chasing, especially with this album.

You have your Disha Hot sauce going to Taco Bell.

My mom made the hot sauce recipe. I wanted to do a relaunch of my hot sauce, but I had to make *Ivory*. I was like, “Fuck, I have to put this aside for now and focus on the music.” The hot sauce packets will be in every Taco Bell in America. It feels good because she crossed the border from Mexico and opened up a restaurant. When I was born, it became too much, so she had to shut it down. This was the hot sauce she used in the restaurant, so it’s me being like, “Since I made you get the restaurant shut down by being born, this is how I’m paying you back.”

What kind of food would your mom make?

She would make tortas ahogadas, chiles rellenos, aguachile. She made a lot of shit. She was so good at it, I’m not going to lie. That just made my mouth water.

The first time we spoke was two years ago, before the success of “Evergreen.” How are you handling the fame that came at you pretty quickly?

It was weird at first. The things I’d say on the internet would come up in interviews. I’d be like, “Damn, people remember that? That was a tiny thought that I had.” By the time “Evergreen” blew up, I already had the infrastructure that I needed to maintain, so it wasn’t like, “Oh, what do we do now?” I had already done eight world tours. I was selling out venues, but it reached a way different level.

In L.A., you went from the Shrine to opening for SZA at the Forum.

When I played the Shrine, which was like 5,000 people, “Evergreen” hadn’t blown up yet, so I was like, “Damn, I feel successful.” After that show, I remember feeling like, “I want to triple this.” And then the SZA tour happened, and I was like, “Fuck.” I had to focus because that was an entire crowd of people who just didn’t know me. It was scary. After the arena tour, that’s when I figured out how I wanted to make music. I was like, “Oh, I want to make music for arenas.”

Did you develop a friendship with SZA on tour?

Yeah, I did. On the road, it was super busy, but she’s super sweet. We were at dinner a couple of months ago, and then I saw her at the Drake show. I was so drunk [*laughs*]. She’s always showing love. 🍷