Oral History Interview with Nicholas Fair— Transcription

Interview Date: 2019-06-16

Place: at the home of Nicholas Fair, Corpus Christi, TX

Duration: 0:38:55

Narrator: Nicholas Fair (NF:)

Interviewer: Ed Warga (EW:)

Transcriber: Ed Warga

[introduction added]

EW: The following is an interview with Nicholas Fair conducted by Ed Warga in Corpus Christi, TX on June 16, 2019.

*interview begins*

EW: Can you say your name?

NF: My name is Nicholas Fair.

EW: And where are you from, Nicholas?

NF: I'm from Corpus Christi [Texas].

EW: Can you tell me a little bit about growing up?

NF: (cough) Like what sorts of things?

EW: I don't know, um, so we could either talk about growing up or just like skip to the music.

NF: Oh. I mean—

EW: If you want to talk about your family—like who did you grow up with? Who was around when you were growing up? What part of town did you grow up in?

NF: I lived sort of off Leopard near Oak Park for the first several years of my life. And then in third grade we moved to Annaville [Texas], which is the outskirts of Corpus essentially. So I didn't really get the city thing. Not that it's a, you know, the big city out here but, you know, as far as—and definitely as far as music is concerned. I mean there weren't like venues or bands playing or—I didn't know anybody else playing music or—have any friends that did anything like that so—I was pretty isolated.

[00:01:26]

EW: When did you start playing music?

NF: I think—I always loved music, and I think I always imagined myself playing it. And then, I guess, in my later teens like towards the end of high school I started, you know, like experimenting with trying to play music. And then I realized it wasn't really that hard to do, so I just went for it.

[00:01:58]

EW: What was some of the music your were listening to when you were young?

NF: When I was a kid?

EW: Yeah, or like what stands out. Like what's the first music that you were like, oh yeah this is great?

[00:02:10]

NF: I mostly liked a lot of, what would be I guess, like sixties pop music stuff they played on the oldies radio station. That was the stuff that I enjoyed the most, and I still enjoy it—although they don't play the stuff I like on the oldies station anymore because, I guess, the era that they cover shifts with time. So that was the stuff I liked the most. And then there were just, you know, whatever was popular at the time—so of course, you know, like in the early nineties it was like all of the grunge bands and all that sort of stuff. And I liked most of that at the time but as far as it like really speaking to me—like I want this poster of this guy on my wall or it really means something to me—I just I didn't fill that with any of that music. It wasn't until a little later that I finally started looking out in the world for treasure as opposed to just taking what was like fed to me by my peers—or, you know, like the radio or TV or whatever—that I started finding things that really spoke to me.

[00:03:33]

EW: Yeah, why don't you go into that like what are the some of the first bands that you found? Or the first musicians that were like, oh yeah this is ah—that started influencing you?

NF: Probably—maybe like Leonard Cohen. Like the first Leonard Cohen album was a really big deal. I liked a lot of like eighties pop music when I was a kid because naturally I was growing up in the eighties, so I heard all that stuff. But the things that stood out to me—that I liked the most—seemed a little darker. And I was always drawn to that sort of sound in music. And so I found other things—like Cocteau twins and stuff like—that I was like, okay this is the good version of what I'm used to. So once a few things like that had happened I realized, you know, there's so much more out there than I'm aware of. And the internet wasn't really—the internet was there, but I didn't have high-speed internet. So I don't know if—it probably didn't exist yet, but eventually it did, but I didn't have it. So I couldn't stream things or do any of the stuff that you would, I guess, typically do. So there was a lot of word of mouth. Meeting—as I started playing music and things like that—meeting people—them turning me onto things—and sort of like reading my demeanor and suggesting things they thought that I would be interested in. And so yeah like the first Leonard Cohen album—and Cocteau twins *Treasure* album—some jazz stuff. I kind of really just went off the deep end—fell in love with like early prog rock—early Genesis and Yes—and stuff like that—and the first King Crimson album. Basically finding music that sounded like what I wanted music to sound like—which was almost in some ways a more grandiose or stripped-down and morose version of the sixties pop music that I liked as a kid. Sort of—it's all a little over the top—and has that feeling like something really important just happened or is about to happen. And it's not just like, bubblegum or I'm angry—there's something more to that, but you don't know what it is—and it's vague—and you have to decide that for yourself. And I was experiencing those emotions. And I thought this is it. That's where it's at. And that's the kind of music that I want to make—anyway I guess I could keep going on—

EW: no that's cool—

NF: but you know—

[00:06:33]

EW: Yeah, so then, then like you started playing music when you're a teenager. Then when did you start performing? when did you start writing songs too?

NF: So I guess yeah around '98 or '99 I started writing songs. I had like a little, parlor-sized, cheap acoustic guitar. And I had saved up money and bought an electric guitar. And borrowed a little like gorilla amp from somebody. And I was wanting to like multi-track and things like that because again because of that music—like I was hearing more than I was capable of doing. So I did the thing with like two tape decks where I would play something and record on the tape deck and then on the second deck record myself playing something whilst the first tape was playing—which, you know, degrades really quickly and sounds terrible—but I was able to hear things laying on top of each other and to start to get the idea of like how to construct things in that way. And then I could listen to music and sort of see how that was working—I'm sure that's a never ending learning process. And I've given up on a lot of aspects of it because I don't want (laughs) the responsibility of having to do all of that, you know. As long as it's good enough for me that's good enough.

[00:08:12]

EW: Right on. So like your saying production is never ending and you keep learning and buying more gear and like—

NF: Yeah I didn't get—I don't get hung up on that because I think a big part of my music—I don't know the correct term—I don't know if “career” sounds a little improper to use, but—I was never about like gear—searching for that special tone. It was more about using what I had. And most of my output over the years is all relative to something that I found at Goodwill or a garage sale and could incorporate into what I was doing. And it was just, you know, if I had a tape deck everything is recorded on tape deck, you know. If I found an echo pedal or something, well then now some things have echo on them.

EW: Um-hm.

NF: But it was never like I need this thing and I gotta get this or—you know, just whatever I had. And I feel like that's how I do everything with art, music, and just in life in general.

[00:09:20]

EW: So what's your what's your production setup like right now? Or like the last time you recorded maybe is the better question.

NF: Well now I'm using a little digital recorder that's essentially set up like a four-track cassette recorder. So it's minimal and simple. And I've had that for a couple years. And previous to that I was still using a cassette four track (laugh) to record things. And I've attempted to use computers—which I have trouble understanding how to do anything. Basically I figure out how to do what a four-track does—cassette four-track does—and I'm just doing the exact same thing on a computer. So and again, eventually I finally got a laptop computer, so then I started using that. But I never like searched out a piece of gear so that I could do something. I didn't—I don't like the idea of getting hung up on those sorts of things. I've known people in the past that were really creative—that had great ideas for things—and they were always hung up on some sort of equipment. Or you know it was like, I take these great photos. I want to take these photos where I'm standing on a ten-foot ladder. I'm doing this thing—and I say, well do you have 10 foot ladder?—No.—like so you're just never gonna take those photos?—I mean just stand on a chair or don't use a la—you know? It seemed more important to actually do it than to like theorize about doing it. So it seemed important to just figure out how to use what you already had to do it.

EW: Right on.

NF: I'm probably getting way off—

EW: This is good.

NF: —off topic.

[00:11:09]

EW: No. I'm curious. I'm debating whether or not to follow up with like a question about limitations and creativity. Maybe like you've already [explained]—maybe that's what you just said—it's like working within limitations you have, and still expressing yourself and—

NF: I guess, yeah—

EW: I don't know if that's like part of your like artist statement, but I guess that's what I'm driving at. But it might not be ah—

NF: It probably is.

EW: Yeah?

NF: I think so. I think that's been the driving force for most of my creative life is wanting to do something and then figuring out how to do it with what I had. And because of being isolated as far as where I was living and not having the money to just buy whatever I needed that sort of dictated what I was doing. And the majority of the time I was doing things in a much more complicated way than maybe was necessary. There's usually an easier way to do things. Like making magazines and stuff like that. I would find things in books in the library that I wanted to use. And I would walk up to the library with my pockets full of change, so I could photocopy the raw material that I wanted—and then cut up the photocopies reassemble them and then photocopy that, you know? All right I have something at home—but I didn't want to destroy the book or the magazine, so I would photocopy it. There's bound to be an easier way to do that. It's not like I'm talking about the 1960s. There were computers and computer programs—I didn't have them—but if I was hung up on that's what I need to do these things, it's more likely that I would have never done them—or would have done a lot less of it—because the amount of time I would have had to invest in figuring out how to use all that. And I always felt like sort of the antiquated technology I was comfortable with and it was familiar and I knew how it worked basically. And so I could manipulate it quickly to get—to achieve— whatever I was trying to achieve. So I guess that is part of the artist statement. I think the stuff—your instruments and your tools are— important to what you're doing.

[00:13:54]

EW: Yeah. Right on. Okay well let's talk about some of your releases. Like, I don't have your discography in front of me, but maybe—I don't know if you want to tell us about some of your releases—some of the projects you've worked on—like any that stand out. I don't know if you want to go—however you want to do it. Like if you have any stories about recording them. Or like releasing them.

[00:14:25]

NF: Sure. I feel like I should go back to something you had mentioned earlier—and I got sidetracked. You asked me about starting to play live. So that started probably like the end of '99. there was a coffee shop downtown on Water Street, which was sort of like—it was a big group of all the weirdos in the city. And it wasn't like hip cool people. It was like the people that just didn't fit in anywhere. I don't know if there were just more of them then—or there's no where for them to to meet—or if there's some sort of stigma in like modern Instagram culture—like what is acceptable—I don't know—but it was a bunch of weird people that that didn't go together. And anyway they had an open mic. And I started playing down there. And lots of people turned me on to things—to music and movies and books—and you know people would say you know read this book. someone gave me—like what was it—it was *Demian* by Hermann Hesse, which is one of my favorite books and one of my favorite authors and, you know, completely changed my life. And that's where the process started of realizing that—there were things out there that did speak to me in that way that I was searching for in my youth. And once I found them like almost immediately I realized that I could contribute to that by also making things that spoke to me. That were even more refined. So that's when it started.

[00:16:27]

So then, yeah. Okay. So I started—continued to write music and stuff. And the releases I think that probably started shortly after that around that time—like compiling songs off four-track tapes and making tapes for friends. Giving those out. Those were usually like one offs—I mean they would have had probably similar songs, but it would have been dependent on when I made it. One I made a month later would have a couple songs that I didn't have the last time I made a tape. And as far as releases go, it would have started with things like that.

[00:17:10]

And then around 2000 I came up with the Gnosis Antiquaries name, (cough) which originally was going to be a band name. I wanted to have sort of like a jazzy, dark, depressed, bossa nova band or something like—which I still want to do. I'm still trying to get that together. But it didn't really work. But the name stuck. And then I decided, well that will sort of be like my record label or like my production company. And I still use it to this day. Everything that I put out—as if it's a legitimate company releasing something and not just me putting out my own stuff. So I—shortly after that I put out a tape of some field recordings of drum circles that I'd recorded. Usually back then I would make between like two to ten copies of something. And usually if I made ten copies of something it was hard to get rid of all ten of them. I just think nobody was really interested in the sorts of things that I was doing—or wanting to do.

[00:18:38]

I put out some cassette singles. I had found somewhere on the computer that had like five minute cassettes. And they were cheaper because they had less tape on them. And I thought, well okay. And I, you know, I bought lots of cassette singles when I was a kid because I couldn't afford the full album. So I'd get the single. So it was—I thought it was neat, and I liked the idea. And it also hearkened back to the oldies station—sort of like, if you ever get albums by those guys—I mean it was all about the singles. Who cares about the other stuff, you know? So I thought I can do that too. So I attempted to do that—put out some singles. And eventually started making CDs. And that again, once I had the capability to make CDs then it started the same way the tapes did where it's just compilations of home recordings. And then I would have albums—or I'd record albums. And I started—over the years my bedroom started filling up with—I found an old organ here—and found this speaker—found this guitar pedal—found this thing. And then it would just progress what I was capable of doing with whatever I had. I started doing like ambient experimental sound collage things. At Goodwill they had a big bin full of tapes I would dig through and find the old cassettes for answering machines—which were loop cassettes. So I'd use those. And I'd record something and have that looped and then play a Casio over the top of it and then flip that backwards in the four-track or something—slow it down. You know? Things like that. So again, I'm still on that—like what I had access to—and that dictating which direction things went.

[00:20:36]

I don't know how far to take this. I don't know if you want me to get specific—into specific projects. But essentially it got to the point where I wanted to play with other people. I wanted to have a band. I wanted to have those sorts of experiences. So coming into town and playing I eventually met other musicians. They were almost always very like band oriented. They had a band and they played gigs and things like that. And I just never—I wasn't in a position to constantly drive fifteen to twenty minutes to practice and things like that, so it never really came together. And I had already spent so many years just doing everything myself in my bedroom—and not having anyone else involved in any part of it—there was no reason to stop doing that. I still try to incorporate people into things. Some of the projects are things like that.

[00:21:35]

I had one project called *Kali Yuga,* which was one of my friends and we would get together sometimes and do weird sort of Indian inspired music. And I would record it on the tape—my tape recorder—and that was maybe between like late '99 and 2003, or so. And I just went through all my tapes one day and ripped to the computer everything that related to that or had that that sound aesthetic to it and collaged it together and made an album. And we did a little work of like building up a back-story to it and sort of creating this alternate world in which this music existed. And so I put that out on CD.

[00:22:32]

Around that time I put out several things. And I was using DVD cases that I would get at Goodwill. I would—they were like a quarter or something—so I would buy DVDs that had a nice case and then throw the DVD away and all of that so that I could get the case. And I liked that because it had more surface area for the artwork. And I would make collage artwork. Anyway, yeah. That's basically—I'm still doing that—just different versions of that—anytime I come up with a project, I put it out.

[00:23:06]

EW: So are you still—like—so now it's 2019. We have the in—you have you have the internet. I know you're online.

NF: Yeah, I have the Internet.

EW: You've got a basecamp—not 'basecamp' what's it called?

NF: A bandcamp.

EW: Bandcamp.

NF: Yeah. Yeah, I haven't had it for that long (laugh).

EW: Oh, no?

NF: You would think I would have had those sorts of things like years ago or kept up with it. But again, it's like that—it just doesn't fit into my operating world. When I try to do it, it just doesn't feel comfortable.

EW: Yeah, so my question was like now if you would release something would you still put out physical media with artwork or would you default to like online, digital only release?

[00:24:01]

NF: I would still do physical media just because, I don't know, that's my preferred way to do it. I feel like making it—the physical copy of the thing—is part of the creative process—like seeing it through to the end. Putting it on the internet I feet like is—not that someone's going to like download it and add to it—but it almost has that feeling of like that I didn't really have—you know like being in bands and things like that—if like somehow—it's like I'm letting go of it. And when I make the physical thing that's like screwing the lid on it. Somehow it's done and this is what it is. And whatever the packaging and all of that—like that's the final product. And somehow putting it online it feels like you're leaving it open-ended for someone else to you know to put it on a website and write words around it and put a new logo across the top—maybe not on the artwork but on their website and what their blog is called or all these things and somehow it's not just your thing. It's your thing with someone else's interpretations or opinions about it. That doesn't sound appealing to me.

[00:25:26]

EW: Okay, good. So we've established you have fundamental issues with the internet. I like it. Hypertext.

NF: But my newest release I—it is on the internet. I put it on the Bandcamp. And I somehow—someone had mentioned some program thing it—somehow it's on Spotify. I'm not sure how it got on there. I don't have Spotify. I don't know how to use it or like get on there myself. But I told someone it was on there, and they got on their phone and they showed me a picture so—and it was like the album cover and it said Spotify. So I'm pretty sure it's on there (laugh). What that means, I don't know. What I get out of that, I don't know. I'm sure no one will listen to it. It'll be like when I put a tape out. Like three people will listen to it. That's okay. It'll probably be the same three people that would have just bought the tape anyway—or I would have just given to because no one wanted to buy it. But that's not important really.

EW: Yeah, well—

NF: If that was important I would have stopped doing this a long time ago.

[00:26:33]

EW: So what is important? What would you say is the purpose or the importance?

NF: I feel like the purpose is expressing—expressing something that I can't explain—something that isn't expressible with just normal speaking. I don't know. It's like I'm trying to say something but not with my mouth, or something. I don't know how to describe it. I just feel this urge to recreate something that's like inside my head that I can't describe. And the reason I keep doing it is because I feel like I get closer to the thing I'm trying to capture. And I try to do the other—the art and the poetry in lots of different ways. And I don't think that it's—I'll capture what I'm trying to capture down any one particular avenue. Like the more I work at all these things the more I think that ultimately it will be a collaboration between all of those elements that will create the thing I'm looking for (laugh). (cat meowing)

[00:28:00]

EW: So basically, you're saying like you're trying to express something, make a statement, and that it involves like all your art?

NF: Right.

[00:28:11]

EW: I don't know if you want to say anything more about that.

NF: Yeah—I mean I don't even know if 'making a statement' is the right term.

EW: Okay. Just expressing something. You want to put something down.

[00:28:22]

NF: Yeah. I think I'm trying to create some sort of alternate reality. And it's probably just in hopes that someone else (cat meows) sees that or hears that in their mind. And that will somehow justify my own neuroses by knowing that, I'm not alone (laugh). Maybe. I don't really know why I just—I also enjoy it. There's that too. (laugh)

EW: It's fun?

NF: As you get older and responsibilities you sort of think, you know, this is nice. It's nice to do something that you don't have to do.

[cat interrupts and recording skips ahead]

[00:29:05]

EW: You want to talk about scoring films?

NF: Yeah. Scoring films. So around around 2000 and I don't know three or four there was a couple guys that were going to school at A&M I think they're taking some filmmaking classes. It was the first year that they were doing a little local Film Festival thing. And so they had some kind of a mixer, and I thought, ok I'm gonna go out there in the world. And I made some CDs—I actually made little packets where I had made a little Gnosis Antiquaries business card—that I typed out on a typewriter because I didn't have a computer printer. And then I made some like collage art thing that I photocopied at the library—and I put it in the manila envelope—and then I made CDs—and I just put little like minute long snippets of different types of things—as if someone might steal the entire song if I put it on there, right? You know just doing my thing I guess. Anyway I guess a couple of these guys liked it and they asked me to do the music for the films they're making, which I did. And then we formed a relationship and I did the music for several of their films. One of the guys now lives in Austin and does a podcast. And I do the music for his podcast. So I've basically done the music for everything that guy's ever done. And a couple of his friends I ended up working on their projects—acting in things or doing music. And one of them directed plays at the Harbor Playhouse, at the time, so I did the music for a couple plays at Harbor Playhouse—*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Christmas Carol*. So I did very strange odd music unlike any music either one of those has ever had before. I think it went well. I mean I didn't hear any complaints—but I didn't hear anything good about it either so—but he let me do it, which was the nice thing.

[00:31:45]

So that's how that's gone and I'm still interested in doing that but I'm getting a little more, as I get older, a little more refined in my own vision of my own work, which is making it harder for me to find people that I'm willing to work with because a lot of times it just doesn't even come close to fitting in with what I'm trying to achieve. And so yeah, I don't know what to do about that. You know, probably a lot of having done everything by myself it makes it hard for me to do things with other people especially when it's their thing and I'm just contributing to it. It's fun but, you know, what I'd prefer is people contributing to my thing. (laugh) That probably sounds terrible to say but—but, you know—I don't want to ask people that, like, hey play this this way because I can't do it. That's selfish, so I'll just do it by myself—so much as I can.

[00:32:59]

EW: So what venues in Corpus Chrsiti have you been playing at? Like what are the good places to play at for an independent musician?

NF: Umm, I don't know. I mean now there's the NASA—Studio B it used to be called. And that's, as far as I know, that's really the first place that you could play comfortably if you're something other than a rock band. So I did sing in a more rocking type band for a few years, but it still wasn't really suited to the options, which were mostly just bars, you know, sports bars and stuff and people just want to hear rock and roll party music, which I don't do, so there's just nowhere to play.

EW: So before the NASA there wasn't any place to play?

NF: No.

EW: What about house shows? Not in this town?

[00:34:02]

NF: I mean yeah, not in this town. I mean I've heard of all this stuff but it either wasn't happening—or it wasn't happening often—or it wasn't anything that I knew about. So yeah I'm fairly out of the loop on those sorts of things. But over the years did play, you know, played in lots of places. And I wouldn't say any of them were suited for like slow, depressing, melancholy, whatever music type stuff or like musique concrète—crazy noise experimental stuff either, which I also do. Yeah so, I've done a lot of those things—when I did do that—I would attempt to do that live, you know, in the early 2000 mid 2000s that era—was like at art galleries. The Islander Art Gallery. There was a place called Swell artspace that was over on the south side [Corpus Christi]. It wasn't there for very long. But yeah I mean I would like drag an organ into the art gallery and hook up a bunch of guitar pedals and you know bang on reverb tanks and weird stuff like that. No one had any interest in that sort of thing. I don't even know why I bothered to do it other than to do it you know.

[00:35:44]

But yeah not lots of venues. I have some friends that are musicians that did punk bands and things like that. They'll tell me stories of places suited to punk bands and stuff that were around in the early to mid-eighties and stuff like that. But it's very genre specific, I think, your options in this city—and I don't fit into any of those genres. So there weren't a lot of opportunities. But that was okay because it's hard to do it by yourself. It's hard to load anything you might need by yourself into your car and set it up and then try to play two or three things at once by yourself to three people, you know—then load it all back up and then drive back to Annaville. You know it was—I did it anyway but it was a lot of work—Do It Yourself, I guess, right? That's what this is supposed to be about right?

[00:36:55]

EW: That's what this is all about, yeah.

NF: All right.

EW: Yeah.

NF: So—

EW: Yeah. right on.

NF: It was fun.

[00:37:01]

EW: Very cool. Is there anything you want to talk about that I didn't ask you—like anything you want to bring up?

NF: I'm not sure. I mean I think we covered most of the bases—without getting like into super specifics that wouldn't mean anything to anybody. You know what I mean?

EW: Yeah.

NF: Unless they were like had a box of stuff in front of them—other than that it wouldn't mean anything so. But yeah, I guess that's the jest of my story is that I like to make weird music in a town that there's no place for it, and so I just made my own place for it. And whenever I had the opportunity, I tried to squeeze it in anywhere I could. And I still believe that someday things will come around. And just as I'm getting tired of doing the things that I'm doing now maybe it will suddenly become something people are interested in. And then someone else can do it. And they won't have any place to do it either. And they'll have to do just like I did—just try to carve their own spot. Maybe that's part of the process of it too—just wanting to do it badly enough that you just did it anyway even though no one cared but you.

[00:38:43]

EW: Yeah, that's great. That's a great note to end on.

NF: Yeah.

EW: I really appreciate it, Nick.

NF: Thank you.

[unintelligible]

NF: It was nice to talk about it.