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A JOURNEY WITH LORD HURON

Lead man, Ben Schneider, of the indie folk-rock group Lord Huron on storytelling, luck and a journey back to childhood dreams

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IF TRANSFORMING A solo-bedroom recording project into a lifestyle as a professional rock star is the stuff of dreams, then singer/songwriter Ben Schneider, the creative force behind the indie folk-rock group Lord Huron, is living it. In just two years, the Los Angeles-based group went from an experimental recording project to a Pitchfork-reviewed band with appearances on “The Tonight Show” and “Jimmy Kimmel Live” to promote their first full album, “*Lonesome Dreams*.”

Schneider shows up at my snow-covered doorstep in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to talk about his unintentional journey into music, his work as a visual artist and the importance of following childhood dreams. He’s tall with a warm smile and a face full of scruff, donning a red, plaid jacket and his signature cowboy hat. It’s December, and he’s just returned from a holiday visit to his family’s cottage on frozen Lake Huron, the band’s namesake. It’s the same location where, three years prior, Schneider went on a solo weeklong retreat and emerged with three songs entirely self-recorded. Those songs became Lord Huron’s first EP, “*Into the Sun*.”

At the time, Schneider had no idea where his music would take him. He had a day job as an art director at a Los Angeles-based advertising agency.

“I just saw it as a creative release outside of my job,” Schneider says of his first EP. “It truly is a bedroom recording project.”

Schneider and I first met while studying Fine Arts at the University of Michigan, almost a decade ago, and have stayed friends ever since. The last time I saw him was at a salsa club inside a converted airplane hangar in the outskirts of Amsterdam. It was at the end of Lord



Huron's European summer tour on a nonstop schedule. Listening to his music, a stream of catchy, carefree tunes that journey through a mythology of sweeping, mystical landscapes, it seems fitting that I never know where in the world our paths will overlap.

As a songwriter, Schneider's lyrics examine what it means to journey. There's a push and pull between wanderlust — the desire to explore far off places — and a deep longing for home. "It's the two sides of my personality," Schneider says. "I've always felt a pull to get out into the world, wander and see what's out there, but I've also felt a strong attachment to home, to my friends and family. That's been the defining struggle of my life so far, those two parts of my personality." He thought about this contradiction while writing "Lonesome Dreams," released in 2012.

It's no surprise that Schneider's music has become popular so fast. The sound is accessible, a melodic blend of folk Americana with a tropical, island feel. Songs are filled with sentiments of love, longing, loneliness and an eternal search for something more. The lyrics inspire images of endless landscapes filled with winding rivers, mountains and the sweeping countryside.

ONSTAGE, Schneider has the confidence and charisma of a seasoned performer, but he downplays his success when he speaks about it privately.

He attributes his quick rise to a combination of hard work and luck.

"I feel like I had a specific string of circumstances that helped this happen the way it did," says Schneider. "I've definitely put in a lot of work...but I also know the nature of [the music] business and there is luck involved, there's no way around it. If that writer hadn't picked up that CD, maybe it would've happened some other way, but maybe not."

Schneider is referring to a music festival he attended in Big Sur in 2010, a few months after his weeklong solo recording project in Michigan. His sister Caitlin encouraged him to bring along a few copies of the three-song EP, "Into the Sun." "I was kind of nervous and almost didn't want to invest the time in it because I figured it was such a lost cause." His sister reminded him how much he loved making music and that was enough of a reason to at least try to get it out there.

"What's funny is at that time I don't think I would have even said music was my dream anymore. In that way it was like having my eyes opened again. It revealed itself." Schneider says that the realization that there was a possibility of becoming a professional musician was like bringing an abandoned childhood dream back to life. "It's one of those things that as a kid, if you like doing it, you're probably good at it. That stuff just doesn't go away."

As chance would have it, a popular music blog, "Yours Truly," picked up an EP, wrote a good review, and shortly thereafter requests for live shows began rolling in. The only problem was, Schneider didn't have a band. "It was just me and I really wanted to play shows, but I can't do that by myself," Schneider says. "I wasn't in the music scene so I didn't know anybody." He called up Mark Barry, a percussionist and high school friend from Michigan, and asked him to fly out to play one show. Barry agreed, played the show and never went home after that. It wasn't long before two other old friends from Michigan joined the group and requests for record deals started coming in. Besides Schneider and Barry, today the band includes three other full-time members, Tom Renaud (guitar, vocals), Miguel Briseño (bass, percussion) and Karl Kerfoot (guitar, vocals).

Fast forward three years and, in addition to the big name primetime gigs, Lord Huron is a solid five-person band who has opened for the likes of Dave Matthews and Alt-J. It has also performed on the festival circuit with shows at Coachella, the Newport Folk Festival, SxSW and Sasquatch, among others. "It's really such a blur. You don't stop and think about it," Schneider says.

Since then, the band has spent most of the past two years touring across the U.S. and Europe and is slated to continue touring in early 2014 before scaling back in order to complete their second album to be released at the end of the year.

SCHNEIDER'S early interest in music was inspired by his father, an amateur guitar player. He started playing bass in an orchestra at the age of ten. "All of my extracurricular time in high school was spent playing in bands. I quit baseball to be in a band."

But when it came time for college, Schneider chose art over music. "At that point I saw music more as a hobby," he says. "It stayed like that for the next ten years."

After college in 2005, Schneider headed west. He followed a girl to Los Angeles and found work in advertising. "I was working at a creative job, but I didn't feel satisfied, so in my free time I started doing music again," he says. Schneider's songs had a visual storytelling element from the start. As he wrote music, he developed accompanying visuals in tandem.



Today Schneider still creates all of Lord Huron's visual artwork himself. The designs have an old-timey feel with romantic imagery of mythical landscapes that complement the sentiment of his lyrics. Both sound and visuals experienced together offer a display of multilayered storytelling at its finest. "I've always liked projects of any kind that enable you to inhabit an experience on a wider scale. I really wanted to do that with Lord Huron," Schneider says. "The visuals I make inform the music and the music informs the visuals. It's a nice relationship. People can appreciate the music on its own if they want, but I'm trying to build a mythology and universe that they can dive into."

A FEW weeks after our sit-down, I meet Schneider in Los Angeles for Lord Huron's performance on "Jimmy Kimmel Live." He's confident and cool on stage, wearing his cowboy hat, which fits with the Western Americana story theme of his album. I ask him what it's like to perform on live TV. "It basically feels like a really cool gig. There's all this anticipation leading up to a brief thing that we've done a million times before, but it still feels nerve-racking," Schneider says. He insists that his nervousness only lasts a second before he's able to focus on the music. "A little whiskey doesn't hurt either," he laughs.

While Schneider admits that he probably quit his day job too early back in 2010, he hasn't looked back. "There are all kinds of ways you can convince yourself not to do things. I feel like it's such a big part of life, conning ourselves in and out of things," he says. "It goes both ways. Convincing yourself that something is good for you when maybe it isn't and convincing yourself that something is too hard for you when it's probably not. I firmly believe that if you commit yourself to what you're truly interested in, it will eventually lead you somewhere good. It might not make you rich," he laughs. "But somehow it will lead you someplace good."

"What good is livin' a life you've been given if all you do is stand in one place?" - from "To the Ends of the Earth" on Lonesome Dreams



