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Lana Del Rey Meets Daniel Johnston: Inside 'Hi, How Are You Daniel Johnston?' L.A. Premiere  
By Colin Stutz

Speak to the creative team behind the new Daniel Johnston short *Hi, How Are you Daniel Johnston?* and they'll tell you it was all a labor of love. With that in mind, it's understandable the project took nearly eight years to develop. But in that time it found its way to transcend any biopic retelling of one of America's most beloved but troubled creative minds, and it picked up some notable supporters along the way as well. With the help of a crowd-funding campaign backed by Lana Del Rey, Mac Miller and hundreds of others, the 15-minute piece is finally complete and was shared for the first time publicly for a Saturday night premiere at Los Angeles' MAMA Gallery.

The event was fittingly more of an art show than red-carpet affair, with Johnston's early drawings and paintings from 1979 to 1989 (the era when he created his iconic album *Hi, How Are You*) hung around the space. Johnston himself sat in the corner of the gallery for most the night, seemingly comfortable on a sagging couch amid a living-room-like setup the film's director and co-star Gabriel Sunday bought at a thrift store to resemble Johnston's actual home in Waller, Texas.

"As you can see he's very comfortable here," Sunday said. "He's got his Coca-Cola, he's got his sugar-free gummy bears and he's got his cigarettes and he's got his chord organs in case he wants to bang out a couple chords."

Johnston's living room is a key element to *Hi, How Are you Daniel Johnston?*, as the film intends to bring the audience inside the artist's schizophrenic head with that location acting as a cage-like home for his creative processes. In it, Johnston plays himself in modern time and carries on conversations with a 1983 version of himself played by Sunday, offering advice to his past self. Meanwhile, Soko stars as Johnston's long-lost love, Laurie, a haunting spirit of unattainable inspiration. It's both silly and somber, with Johnston's smiling suggestion of soda and ice cream to help depression as well as the serious recommendation that his younger self choose light over the darkness to which he fell victim.

The 15-minute film played on repeat through the night in a backroom, projected onto two walls split by a corner in an immersive and experimental form -- live action sequences played out on the wall to the left while animated sequences filled out the right side. In front was a retro tube television playing the same programs from Johnston's living room in the film, in effect bringing the audience into scene. With dozens filling the room to sit on the floor or stand and watch the film, the surrealism was accentuated by Johnston's actual presence in the room, further distorting any sense of location.

"It moved me. It was sad. It touched me," said Del Rey afterwards. "There were so many dimensions in one room, the past, the present at the time and then here he is right there watching himself, I mean I guess the one thing I hoped is that he understood that while he's home alone doing his art still -- he says he writes every day -- that he knows that he really did make a difference in people's lives. He made a difference in mine."

Del Rey herself is no stranger to brooding creativity, and she said she initially felt a connection with Johnston after watching the 2005 documentary *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*. After discovering the 2013 Kickstarter campaign that Sunday launched to finish the project, she said she was drawn to get involved. In the end, that meant contributing a cover of Johnston's "Some Things Last a Long Time" for the film, which plays over the end credits.

Del Rey explained her own identifying to Johnston's story as "trying to choose the darkness or the light and sort of participating in the path that you're going to take, to the limited ability you can." She added, "I didn't know if this film would move me just as much, but the fact that it's a progression, it moves me even deeper."

The premiere was also Del Rey and Johnston's first meeting, which Del Rey said had her turning bright red from nervous excitement. "I guess he was sort of a crush at one time a decade ago," she said.

Sunday described the two musicians' meeting as a "total fan moment" on Del Rey's part, adding, "It was so wonderful and sweet."

Throughout the night, Johnston mostly stuck to his living-room corner while people approached him. As for his own relationship with Johnston, Sunday explained that a big breakthrough came once he started speaking to Johnston mimicking his voice, which actually led to the film's creative concept.

"I'm a mimic so I was doing his voice and then when we put the idea together to do the project, he was like, 'Do you play piano?' I was like, 'Well I kind of started learning because I wanted to play your songs.' And he was like, 'Oh play a song.' And I did it and I kind of did it naturally in his voice, and he was just dying, he thought it was hilarious. So I started doing that around him," Sunday said. "He'd be like, 'Oh man, wanna get some cheeseburgers?' And I'd be like, '[in Johnston's voice] Oh yeah, man, I'd love to get some cheeseburgers!'"

From there, Sunday said, Johnston actually started calling him Dan and eventually after spending more time together the distinction became further blurred.

"There was one time when we were in a car and there was a rain storm happening," said Sunday, "all these frogs were jumping into the road, it was total Magnolia weird, and he gave me a piece of advice, from Daniel to Daniel, and I was like, 'Wow, that's a crazy moment and that would be a really cool movie.' It was something about like in the movie going towards the light and dark -- that was his advice."

Sunday said he had no idea of how the concept would come together having Johnston play himself, speaking to a younger version of himself, and in the end, the film almost entirely came together in editing. But it worked, and he hopes people gain an insight into Johnston, past and present.

"You can't write a script and just give it to him and have him read it; you need it to be natural. There was a complete shaping story in the edit process," Sunday said of his subject. "But I just wanted to be able to do it kind of like a tribute... like an update of 'here's where Dan is now.'"

Johnston himself seemed pleased with the film as well. He said, "It was one of my favorite films that they've done. It was a lot better than most of them."

"It was hilarious," he added. "I was surprised it came out so good."

Hi, How Are you Daniel Johnston? will be released online Wednesday at [danieljohnstonfilm.com](http://danieljohnstonfilm.com).