



Arthur Buck

Sometimes, the catalyst for creating great art is simply being in the right place at the right time. For Arthur Buck, the new collaboration between singer-songwriter Joseph Arthur and guitarist Peter Buck, that place was Mexico, and that time was the fall of 2017. The two musicians, it should be noted, have a history that stretches back decades; among other pairings, Arthur opened shows for R.E.M. in the early 2000s, while Buck has backed Arthur on numerous occasions, including for an elegiac, piano-led cover of Lou Reed's "Walk On the Wild Side" on the Late Show with David Letterman in 2014.

But back to Mexico.

Specifically, a little town off the Baja coast named Todos Santos, with the Sierra de la Laguna mountains to the east and the bright blue Pacific stretching out infinitely to the west. It is here that Buck has for the last several years held the Todos Santos Music Festival, which he created with his wife, Chloe Johnson, in 2012, shortly after R.E.M. called it a day. Among the many artists who have played the festival is Arthur, who also happened to leave behind a guitar—a Dobro, specifically—after his last appearance there. And so last year he made the trek down to Todos Santos to pick up the instrument. Which is where he ran into Buck.

"I have a house there, and I said to Joe, 'Drop by. Come swimming,'" Buck recalls. Arthur took him up on the offer, though he didn't merely drop by—he moved in. "We'd basically go to the beach, we'd swim in the ocean, and then in the afternoons I'd grab a guitar and we'd sit in the shade and play," Buck says.

During these impromptu jam sessions, Arthur recalls, "My thought at first was, 'Hey, I'll get Peter to play acoustic guitar on some of the stuff I'm working on!' So I started showing him songs. But he was like, 'That's cool. Now check this out.' And he started playing chords and whatnot to songs he was writing. So I put my guitar down and began singing over his changes, and it was magical. It was easy. And these great songs just started popping out."

And they popped out quick: In three days, the pair came up with roughly eight new tunes. And on the fourth day, they gigged. First up was a benefit for Los Bomberos, the local Todos Santos firemen. The next night was a free show for the Palapa Society at the Todos Santos Inn. After that, Arthur recalls, 'I said to Peter, 'Hey, I've got this art show happening in L.A. Why don't you come play with me?' So he did, and we wrote a couple more songs at sound check the day of the show."

One of these was a buoyant, upbeat number titled "I Am the Moment." Explains Buck of the song's origins, "Joe went to get some takeout Thai food and he left his guitar, and I came up with the music and a little melody idea." Recalls Arthur, "When I got back Peter said to me,

‘Finish the lyrics before the show so we can play it tonight.’ And I was like, ‘Dude, finish the lyrics before the show?’ But I did it.”

Buck laughs. “We kinda screwed it up a little bit, and I think we did it twice. But I just like to work quickly and spontaneously. I mean, what’s the worst that can happen, you know?”

The pace only quickened from there. Roughly four days later, the two were ensconced in Type Foundry Studio, in Buck’s adopted hometown of Portland, with Arthur programming beats and rhythms and Buck playing acoustic guitar. Total time logged? “About seven hours,” Buck reports. Arthur then took the tracks back to his home studio in Brooklyn, where he recorded his vocals, added instrumental and electronic overdubs and produced the record. Tchad Blake was brought in to mix the proceedings, and, the result is the new Arthur Buck—the product of a shockingly productive burst of inspiration.

“It was all new songs, and it was spontaneous,” he says. “And the great thing about working that way was that it didn’t have to be anything in particular. It was liberated from any expectation. It was free.”

Indeed, the vibrant 11-song collection captures the spontaneity at the heart of the project—right down to the 1-2-3-4 count off from Buck that begins the proceedings—with sounds and styles mashed together in an easy, almost playful manner. The album opens with the aforementioned “I Am the Moment,” which, in its final form, marries Buck’s sharply-strummed acoustic guitar chords to an almost disco beat, with all manner of sonic ephemera ping-ponging around in the background.

Explains Arthur, “I wanted to make it something that you would want to dance to. I like sort of chaotic elements, and the aesthetic of electronics and samples and stuff like that. That excites me in music. And I enjoy blending forms, like, ‘Okay, this is rock and roll, but it’s got an indie rock vibe and it’s funky.’ It’s a little bit wrong, but that’s what I like about it.”

That sort of stylistic subversiveness is all over Arthur Buck, from the hip-hop bent of “The Wanderer” to the whistling that kicks off the slinky and soulful “Before Your Love is Gone,” to the chamber-pop-esque album intermission, “Summertime,” which, Buck says, “was something I had written on piano for a play a while ago and was just sitting around. And near the end of the project I said to Joe, ‘I’m gonna send you something that’s like 30 seconds long and your job is to sing to it tonight.’ And I think he had it back to me the next day.”

Then there’s the ultra-catchy “Are You Electrified?,” which marries a verse built on ringing, arpeggiated acoustic guitars to an anthemic, distorted power-chord chorus (“That’s the single,” Buck says, then laughs. “Or whatever they call it these days...”), as well as the dark and droning “Can’t Make It Without You,” which Arthur points to as one of his favorites on the album. “That one is pure Peter-Buck-feedback-guitar-and-EBow,” he says. “Peter did that in the studio in Portland and I was just watching him thinking, What the fuuuck... Because I’m a huge R.E.M. fan, and that one reminded me of something like ‘E-Bow the Letter.’ I was sitting

there going, 'That's that sound!'" He laughs. "And it's like, I don't know why that surprised me, you know what I mean? But the song is just amazing."

Buck is similarly enthusiastic about what Arthur brought to the proceedings. "When we were writing the songs I didn't really foresee this record sounding like it does," he says. "I wasn't really sure what would happen. But when Joe started sending me rough mixes of stuff I was like, 'Oh, yeah, this is kinda Joe's picture of what these songs are.' It's not what I would've done, but I love that. Everyone has different ways of writing and Joe tends to really write off of inspiration. He'll do a song with 15 verses and one chorus. And that's great. But I tend to throw in a lot of bridges. I like chords. I like hooks. So the two of us complement each other really well. And I also like that the songs we wrote are really forward-looking in a lot of ways. It's a very positive record."

Arthur concurs. "That's the vibe I wanted. I mean, with the state of the world right now, do we really want to hear a white guy singing about how miserable he is? We need some optimistic music. But at the same time, I don't feel this music voids the struggle at all." As an example, he points to 'The Wanderer,' which was among the first tunes the pair composed back in Todos Santos. "The lyrics sort of talk about how you don't have to be miserable," Arthur says. "They acknowledge suffering while still transcending it. And I feel like the record as a whole does that. It has a positive vibe without being hokey, which is a difficult thing to do."

As for what comes next for Arthur Buck, now that the album is done? "We're definitely going to play a bunch of shows," Buck says. And as things tend to go with the pair, when there's playing, there's also writing. "We've already come up with more songs for whatever's going to come next," he continues. "So absolutely, this will be an ongoing thing."

"It's funny," Arthur adds. "Peter and I always talked about writing together, and we just never did. And this time it just happened weirdly spontaneously. I really did go down to Mexico just to get my Dobro. But once I was there, meeting up with Peter and playing some music just seemed like a good idea."

He laughs. "Now, of course, I'm like, 'That was the best decision I could have ever made!'"