



20 POP

Meet Boots, a one-man avant-garde. BY JON PARELES

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Boldly Striding Out of the Shadows

After a coup with Beyoncé, Boots records his own video.

TWENTYNINE PALMS, CALIF. — “We’ve got to go now” said Jordan Asher, the musician who records as Boots, as his video crew rapidly packed up equipment. With the Mojave Desert as a backdrop, Boots was directing a mini-movie called “Motorcycle Jesus” wrapped around five of his new songs to be released on his website just eight days later on his 28th birthday, which was Friday.

Boots gained sudden worldwide attention when his name appeared as songwriter and producer for much of Beyoncé’s 2013 album, “Beyoncé,” and it became clear that he had shaped the starkly intimate sound of songs like “Halo,” “Heaven” and “Blue.” Now he is about to decisively end his low profile. “I’m grabbing onto 2015 by the horns,” he said.

Boots is a self-taught, all-around 21st-century musician: singer, rapper, guitarist, keyboardist, drummer, beat programmer, video director, graphic designer. He came up with his logo, a horizontal stripe with two verticals, which can look like connected crosses or, people have told him, like “a bridge, train tracks, motorcycle handlebars,” he said. “I’m not going to reveal right yet what it is. But if it’s got you wondering, I’m on the right path.”

He has a major-label contract with the Casablanca Music division of Atlantic, and “Motorcycle Jesus” will be followed by a full-length album later this year; he’s releasing as much of his music as possible at an out cost. On Jan. 30, he stepped onstage at Madison Square Garden to play hard-rock guitar with the hip-hop duo Run the Jewels. He has also produced what he describes as “crazy futuristic” albums — with the British singer FKA Twigs and with the Los Angeles art-rock band Autechre. He describes himself as “a weird kind of eclectic avant-garde dude who loves pop music, because I think it can transcend what we think pop is now.”

EP-1, the prolific New York City rapper and producer who is half of Run the Jewels (with Killer Mike of Atlanta), wrote in an email: “He’s the only person I know who is as comfortable and confident making a rock song as he is an R&B song. He can flip between these sweet, beautiful ballads and really hard, intense bruise-type songs and then straight into beat-driven stuff seamlessly, and often in the same song. He doesn’t have to force it. He’s naturally all of his influences.”

Steve Rubinyan, who has produced rock music, said: “The challenge of it is that you can’t really put it into a box, like the talent is untouchable. There’s some breathtakingly beautiful stand-alone stuff, and then there’s stuff you can hardly get a description to.”

“Whatever choice shifting direction that his music takes him and his inspiration take him, I’m continually impressed by the talent and the vision of what he wants to



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN HANCOCK



Justin Asher, above, known professionally as Boots, is the Mojave Desert recording his new music video, “Motorcycle Jesus.” Left, recording in a crew member scrutinizes a shot.

do.”

The songs on “Motorcycle Jesus” are more or less rock songs. They use guitars, drums and keyboards that were played live in studios, then manipulated and tweaked to Boots’ surreal taste. The music reveals his fondness for the melodic reach of the Beatles and David Bowie, for the abrupt sonic shifts of hip-hop and for the warped instrumental tones of Nine Inch Nails and Radiohead. The cryptic lyrics, with titles like “Mercey,” “Saucicle Gavers” and “I Run Roulette,” hint at scenarios of alienation, betrayal, technology gone wrong and global disaster: “We can kill but us,” he sings in the chorus of “I Run Roulette.” The closing song, “Glenn we better run, run, run away.”

“Mercey,” which warms, “Diggers in my eyes/Get that evil off my screen,” makes its emotional arc in sound: from a quiet, open elegy to a distorted, catastrophic attack. Another song, “Dish,” grew almost instantly out of an idea that came to Boots at the piano. He called his two drummers, and they joined him to play it live. “As I’ve

playing, I write the words,” he said. “He recorded it. It’s the third take.”

He was working at Studio La Fabrique in the south of France, an old chateau in which every space, with widely varying acoustics, is wired for recording; he took the live recordings, played them in multiple spaces and mixed together the results. “It turned into this really strange haze,” he said possibly “I just destroyed this original studio recording.”

In the “Motorcycle Jesus” video, Boots wanders through a post-apocalyptic world, increasingly bruised and battered. He spent the day with dirt on his clothes and a bloody, soaking stitch on his chest. The video shoot was partly planned — locations had been lined up — and partly improvised; he had written the latest treatment during the two-hour drive from Los Angeles. “It’s all in Justin’s head,” said her manager, Sarah Harris. “We’re just going with it.”

For the shot he was seeking, Boots wanted to be a small figure and musician, all-courtesy on music.



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 hounded by the sunset. But the day's other scenes had run late. As the crew sped down Route 62 in their van, looking for a panorama without houses or power lines, part of the sun was already below the horizon. But in the twilight, a side road looked promising. "If there's a way we can pull off the road and just jump out and get this right here, right now, let's do it," Boots said.

The mountains carved a jagged line of golden light as the crew assembled the camera and monitor. Boots peered at the screen, framing and calculating the path he would walk, and decided that the camera would make a long, slow pan to meet him. With darkness loosing, they grabbed as many takes as they could; the playback was triumphant. "It was a 45-second shot that ends up making it totally worthwhile being there," said the director of photography, Hester Baker.

The day before the desert video shoot, over lunch in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, Boots sipped sparkling wine and wore the same dark clothes — a tank-like shirt, jeans, boots — that he would wear on camera. He is calmly articulate, with a steady gaze and a reserved, opinionated intelligence. The conversation veered to science fiction, kismet, rock, environmental catastrophe and his distaste for social media. "Facebook and Twitter and Instagram are the ugliest places artists can express themselves," he said.

He discussed details of how Brian Wilson recorded "Pet Sounds" and praised the book "Sloers, There and Everywhere," the memoir by the Beatles' recording engineer Geoff Emerick. That book, Boots said, taught him that to create recorded sound, "you open the door and you start looking at things, and there's no wrong way to get there," he said. "You break a sound and it will sound better."

He also spoke about the Beyoncé album that catapulted his career. "It was a freak occurrence, one in a million — could have never happened, could have happened to anybody. But then it happened to me," he said.

Mr. Asher was nicknamed Boots, for his acrobatic howler, by a member of one of the many bands he played with around the Miami area where he grew up. Making music was his only goal. "I don't have another choice," he said. "I dropped out of high school. I can't do anything else. This is it."

For much of his early 20s, he was effectively homeless; going on tour and living out of a suitcase in between. Then to the road, he got short-term jobs that left him wanting to concentrate only on music. "I said, 'I need to focus and just myself all into this, even if it means I don't have an apartment anymore,'" he recalled. He got a little national recognition in 2011



Boots, far left, posing a prop during the recording of his music video.

"The people that find my music, who will dig deeper with it, are the people I want to hear it."

with a band called Bloods, an exercise in retro tunes and modern production that was trumped, he said, by Lana Del Rey, doing it better. He briefly considered culinary school.

But a last-ditch bout of songwriting yielded "Omo You," a moody minor-key song with layers of eerie background voices and a particular rhythmic undertone. He saw it as a template for a solo album. "That song was my heart," he said. Somehow — Boots refused under persistent questioning to say how — Beyoncé heard it, and asked if he had more music. Then he was asked to do a week of songwriting in February 2013, he said. "A week turned into two weeks, and then it turned into the rest of the album," he said.

For the first few months he would spend his songwriting weeks in hotels with Beyoncé's team, and the times in between on a friend's couch. In June, Jay-Z's Roc-A-Fella signed him to a publishing deal, and he was "not homeless for the first time in years," he said.

Working on the album, he said, "fastened the world" for him. "If my first really famous people you ever meet are Beyoncé and Jay-Z, every nervous encounter you ever have for the rest of your life will never be as bad as that one," he said. "Madison Square Garden was scribbling, but not nearly as scribbling as the hour before I met Beyoncé."

Unlike some R&B collaborators, who ar-

rive with boots and loops, Boots said he brought finished songs. He tried writing material geared to Beyoncé, but she was drawn instead to songs he had planned to record himself. "They were something that I had to say personally that were resonating with where she was, where she is," he said. "Omo You" became Beyoncé's "Haunted"; Boots's eventual solo album would need a new consciousness.

"It was better as the Beyoncé album — it made sense in the bigger picture," he said. "The Beyoncé album is some people feel like a breath of fresh air because she really did mean it. It wasn't just a net to capture money. It was a real thought."

He added: "It was hard to let go of some of that stuff. But the only thing I want is for people to hear me and experience my music. Even if people never know who I am, which in time, people are still in some way, someone knew now, going to be affected already. Now it's just the funny part of trying to expand on that myth, the mystery guy."

In the spring of 2013, Boots started releasing his own solo songs on his SoundCloud site two at a time, eventually building a 15-song mixtape called "Winter-Spring-Summer-Fall," raps, rockers, electronics-laced tracks and ballads. "The whole idea was to break any expectation of what you thought I might be or do," he said.

The opening song, "A Day in the Life of

Jordan Asher," was a muted rap over warring vocal harmonies; it spots about holding a young man injured in a subway accident as he died. "That really happened," he said. "That was a total, completely life-changing thing. I stopped caring about anything that didn't mean anything."

He left the mixtape online for a while, then withdrew it. He expects to do the same with other material: rewarding the attentive, courting serious listeners. "The people that find my music, who will dig deeper with it, are the people I want to hear it," he said. "The people that listen to it based off of 'the worked with this guy,' that's cool, but they probably won't stick around if I freak them out, which is fine. The people who are really in it, they'll stay with me as I score the hell out of them." He grinned. "Bait and switch."

After nightfall in the desert, Boots and the crew returned to the compound where they were staying. Over a rye whiskey, he said, "We're always chasing the sunset."

He was talking about his restless ambitions. The dogged survivalist of his character in "Motorcycle Joes," he said, reflects "people, like myself, who just have to keep moving forward and working, to keep my head and do what my gut tells me. Because I don't know what happens if I stop working, or if I stop moving, or if I stop going perpetually forward. And I'm afraid to fall out."