

MUSIC

The Possibility-Driven Life

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The Unlikely Success of Dntel by Ezra Ace Caraeff

IT WAS AFTER last call and our van was parked outside the Medicine Hat—this was long before NE Alberta sprouted boutiques, Last Thursday didgeridoo jams and became the “Little Bangkok” of That restaurants that it is today.

While nervous handshake transactions occurred outside on the street, we were hunched over the stereo console oblivious to our questionable surroundings. The origins of the CD-R that was playing are still suspect (someone’s roommate was involved), but the sound resonating out of the tiny van speakers absolutely transfixed us.

Up until that point, Dntel was a seldom-recognized project from one Jimmy Tamborello, who was only slightly better known as that guy from Figurine, or—if you prefer unheralded emo bands of yore (which, as a general rule, you should)—the former bassist from Strictly Ballroom. Paralyzed by the rough songs that would eventually become Dntel’s *Life Is Full of Possibilities*, it was clear to us that Tamborello was onto something.

One decade and over a million albums sold later, we just might have been right about what we heard that evening.

“I’m uncomfortable begging people to do it—I want them to be into it,” explains

the soft-spoken Tamborello. For years, he was an unlikely pitchman, a painfully shy bedroom musician who attempted to recruit vocalists to sing over his lush instrumental beds of electronic music. Singer Mia Doi Todd agreed early on, although an attempt to reach Björk at the Grammy ceremonies was less fruitful. For *Life Is Full of Possibilities*, Tamborello accrued a modest cross-section of crooners, including Rachel Haden (That Dog) and a fresh-faced kid from Bellingham, Washington.

The latter of which was Ben Gibbard, back when Death Cab for Cutie was still a little-known band touring in support of *We Have the Facts and We’re Voting Yes*. Their collaboration, the muddled and enthusiastic fandom tale “(This Is) the Dream of Ewan and Char” paved the way for their now-famous the Postal Service project, a modest recording cobbed through mailed instrumental tracks (from Tamborello) and vocals (from Gibbard) that soon became one of the greatest-selling independent records ever.

As the spotlight intensified

on Gibbard and the world began the countdown to a new the Postal Service recording (don’t hold your breath), the diffident Tamborello retreated back into his bedroom to begin work on what would eventually become the next Dntel release, 2007’s *Dumb Luck*. Soaked with a rich assortment of murky electronic glitches and warm instrumental waves, *Dumb Luck* remains his most complete work to date, even if the marquee voices (members of Grizzly Bear, Bright Eyes, Rilo Kiley) that litter the recording once

again directed the attention away from the shy musician pulling the strings behind the curtain.

Now 10 years old, *Life Is Full of Possibilities* is getting the deluxe reissue it so rightly deserves (courtesy of Sub Pop), which also means the demure Tamborello is embarking on an extremely rare set of tour dates. While time and perspective have immensely benefited *Life Is Full of Possibilities*, Tamborello takes a bit more of a dour, pessimistic look back on his breakthrough recording: “It was exciting to have people write about it and review it, but I don’t have a strong memory about the response being super positive. There were a few that were, but there were definitely a lot of lukewarm reactions. But maybe that’s just what sticks with me.”



DNTEL, *Mastered genius, purveyor of hoodies.*