

***angel in realtime.***

How do you celebrate the life of the person who himself gave you life? How do you tell his story, when in fact he told you a version of it that turned out to be wildly untrue and incomplete? How do you process your own grief while still trying to put one foot in front of the other every day?

With a passion as massive as its sound and an unflinching belief in the healing power of music, [**Gang of Youths**](https://www.gangofyouths.com/) are better equipped than just about anyone for the challenge of transforming such formative experiences into soul-stirring songs. The band’s third album, ***angel in realtime.,*** purveys eclectic splendor as expertly as richly nuanced character studies. In the course of the same song, you may find yourself nodding your head, reaching for a stiff glass of something and wiping away tears. You may even want to call your family after you’ve finished listening, just because frontman **Dave Le’aupepe** wouldn’t have it any other way.

“When my dad died in 2018, I didn’t know much about his life or my own heritage,” says **Le’aupepe**, whose mother is of Austrian Jewish descent and whose father was Samoan. “I think people who have lost a parent will understand the desire to suddenly feel close to them by making known the things about them that weren’t widely known. With the music on this album, we aimed for all beauty. We’ve specifically gone for a sound that glides. It’s a perfect reflection of what my dad lived for, and who he was as a person.”

But for **Le’aupepe**, writing in detail about the man known as Tattersall resulted in some startling revelations: he discovered his father had two other children who never knew him during his lifetime (**Le’aupepe** only met these brothers, who grew up in New Zealand, for the first time in 2019). He was also a decade older than he’d claimed to be. Just as confounding was the fact that Tattersall’s legion of siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins around the world believed he had died sometime in the 1970s.

“We practically knew nothing about him other than that he was Samoan,” **Le’aupepe** admits. “I think I always felt like I needed permission to feel Samoan. This process is about a reclamation of the things my family was denied — my brothers were denied a life with us in it and a life with my dad in it, and my sister and I were denied a connection to our heritage and family. I’m prepared for it now, but it was a hard thing for me to come to terms with.”

**Gang of Youth’s** two prior full-lengths, 2015’s ***The Positions*** and 2017’s ***Go Farther in Lightness***, certainly didn’t shy away from ruminating on mortality and matters of faith. Audiences around the world connected deeply with the music, quickly turning the band into a must-see live act.

So, when it came time to face the painful aftermath of profound loss, like the great artists to whom he obsessively listened in his youth, **Le’aupepe** picked up his guitar, opened his notebook, began sketching out sonic conversations with his father and channelled every drop of emotion into **Gang of Youth’s** best album to date, even if it took three tries to get it right. For the band, which features multi-instrumentalists **Jung Kim**, **Tom Hobden**, **Max Dunn** and **Donnie Borzestowski**, the breakthrough moment came when **Le’aupepe** began following “the muse of things that encouraged a great nostalgia in me — things that reminded me of being safe and warm, and that were evocative of my childhood.”

That meant it was absolutely fine for pulsating, Steve Reich-ian electronics to co-exist with a swelling string arrangement out of a Frank Capra film on opener **“You in Everything,”** for beats reminiscent of DJ Shadow and The Avalanches to power [**“tend the garden”**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmLtHVyYEs4) or for a Polynesian choir to sing alongside indie rock anthem **“In the wake of your leave.”** Listeners will even hear traces of drum ’n’ bass on tracks like **“goal of the century,”** where **Le’aupepe** speaks to the departed Tattersall as if he were still sitting right beside him: “It’s six in the morning and England is storming / my wife is asleep and we’re thinking of children / I wish you could meet them.”

“Synthesizing all these influences was a constant process of going into work every day, like a job, and experimenting and experimenting,” says **Le’aupepe**. “I also relied on the other guys to do what they do best. I learned how to let go a bit.”

“We’ve gone in a less safe direction. There’s been a real sense of openness and freedom to the process and after a lot of experimentation we’ve actually ended up more in line with Dave’s actual vision,”, says **Dunn**. “We were able to explore so many different territories and sides of ourselves and that has manifested in the music,” adds **Kim**. “We’re doing things that have never really made an appearance in Gang of Youths.”

“It’s unusual to have so much time, afforded to us by the lockdown, to really experiment and dive deep with the songs,” explains **Hobden**. Part of this unlocking came from the band’s decision to rent an old warehouse space in Hackney and self-produce the record. “We were really able to digest the material we recorded in Auckland,” **Donnie** expands, “the process of layering Pasifika drumming with the live kit was an exciting challenge.”

**Donnie** is referring here to the band’s pre-pandemic trip to [**Aotearoa**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aotearoa) to record with Pasifika and Māori instrumentalists such as the **Anuanua Drummers** from the Cook Islands, **Shane McClean** and the **Auckland Gospel Choir**. These recordings, together with the extensive sampling of composer and explorer [**David Fanshawe’s**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Fanshawe) late 1970’s field recordings of Pasifika music give the record a distinctive sense of time and place. When you add to this the 42-piece string section **Hobden** and **Le’aupepe** travelled to Budapest to record, the album effectively spans 50 years of collective recording and as many as 7 countries.

On ***angel in realtime.,*** **Le’aupepe** hones his love for narration that’s at once non-linear, intertextual, unreliable and devastatingly honest. Songs alternately reference the Jewish high holidays, NBA Hall of Famer **Clyde Drexler** and Argentinian football legend **Gabriel Batistuta**, a luxury Samoan tourist resort, unseasonably warm London weather and holding a dying parent’s hands for the last time. “I like to overstate things that mean nothing and understate things that mean everything,” he says. “It’s always a work of contrast.”

**Le’aupepe** even writes from the perspective of his late father on two songs, **“tend the garden”** and **“the kingdom is within you.”** The latter track encompasses the experiences of “my own father, and the many others who went to New Zealand as a migrant worker from the Pacific,” he says. “I’m speaking from his point-of- view as an archetype — for the many Pasifika workers who endured exploitation and harassment by the State.”

The storytelling is inverted on **“Brothers,”** where **Le’aupepe** speaks plainly and from the heart about coming to terms with his family secrets: *“Our father’s love was unmistakable / And he gave us everything he had / And I guess that meant pretending he was half- white / To give his kids a better chance.”* Later, he devotes a verse to each of his three siblings — among other endearing details, we learn that one brother *“did time for something awesome,”* the other *“inherited our father’s hands”* and **Le’aupepe’s** sister *“sings better”* than any of them.

“It’s not hard to write about people who deserve to be written about,” **Le’aupepe** says. “My wife deserves to have songs written about her. My dad deserves it. My sister and brothers deserve it. I came up with the melody for that song when we were recording in New Zealand, but I didn’t finish it until one night in London when my wife was already asleep. It just came right out, and we recorded it in a single take.”

Having relocated to London in 2017, **Gang of Youths** salutes its growing connection to the metropolis on songs such as the propulsive rocker [**“the angel of 8th ave.”**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9QsAO4BU28) and the elegiac **“Spirit Boy,”** which nods to the contemplative side of classic British acts such as The Verve and Massive Attack, while also featuring a spoken-word interlude from Māori musician and Taonga Pūoro instrumentalist **Shane Mclean**. “When we first started these sessions, I wasn’t able to assemble all the pieces,” **Le’aupepe** offers. “Getting our own space in London and being responsible for the sound ourselves was absolutely vital.”

Ultimately, ***angel in realtime.*** is the rare album that breaks new ground in both sound and vision, spotlighting a hard-working, meticulous band still unlocking its creative potential. “In some ways, this record feels like I’m bringing my dad’s spirit to a place of rest and truth,” **Le’aupepe** says. “I have a lot of trepidation about our first two albums and anxieties about whether they’re any good. This is the first time I’ve been able to allay some of those fears, and hopefully, we’ve managed to capture something vital and beautiful in the process.”

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