



“It’s about what clicks. The guys in Fun. and I just clicked. I look for things that will ignite the best in both the artist and me.”

These days Bhasker could fill his schedule 24/7 with production work—he’s inundated with offers. But in May, he turned his focus toward finishing a solo project he will issue under the alias Billy Kraven. On it, Bhasker plays all the instruments and sings all vocal parts. Jacobson (Bhasker’s manager) describes him as “one of the best singers that no one has heard.” In addition to all the songs Bhasker has cowritten with superstars this past year, he’s squirreled away songs he’s written for his solo album. But when Beyoncé Knowles heard his tune “I Care” and asked if she could record it first, he gave in. “It’s hard to say no when Beyoncé asks to record your song,” Bhasker told me.

He also plans to assemble a band and tour after his Billy Kraven album comes out, but has no intention of leaving producing. The bar for new projects will continue to be set high, though. For Bhasker, the superstar status of an artist or offers of big money aren’t what draw him into a project. He’s determined to work only on music that engages him emotionally. His instincts are serving him well as his list of credits testifies.

Coming to Berklee after growing up in tiny Socorro, New Mexico, must have been an eye-opener for you. It was like coming to music fantasyland. Meeting some of the people I met there was like finding a long-lost brother who liked the same things I did. I was into jazz when I came to Berklee. My first exposure to jazz was my mother playing “Tenderly” on the piano. My piano teacher had given me a tape with the *Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy* album by Chick Corea and Return to Forever on one side and on the other was the Oscar Peterson Trio’s *Night Train* album. When I listened to the tape I thought, “This is it!”

Did you start out learning to read as well as to improvise?

I’ve always been a terrible sight reader. I learned everything by ear. I wish I could sight read better, but my strength is listening to music.

Well, having a well-developed ear is mandatory for a producer.

Yeah, listening is what it’s all about. In production, you can study and go by the book, but the book was written by people who just listened. Sometimes you stop listening and look at the computer screen and see all this stuff. I just try to hear everything. When you are writing a song, I think it’s better not to write it down. Just learning and memorizing it is better.

Was becoming a producer your original dream?

I wanted to become a virtuoso jazz pianist. But I didn’t get all the way there; I’m not Oscar Peterson. But I did learn to use what I have and turn it into a song or some other music. You have to start living your musical life at some point and figure out what you want to say. More often than not, I only needed to do 10 percent of what I’m capable of to accomplish that.

In Kabuki Theater, they say you never show 10; you show seven or eight. You need to have 10 under the surface, but you don’t show everything you’ve got. Likewise, you don’t try to play every single thing you learned at Berklee. Make a musical statement. Sometimes that may consist of just a few notes. The point is to say something with what you’ve learned.

For me it was a big step to figure out what it means to be an artist. I found there were things I’d been doing

naturally for years, and I had to embrace those things. After going through the training to become a competent musician, I had to go back to the childlike excitement about music. It’s always important for the music to be exciting

What was the path that led you from Berklee to L.A.?

I left Berklee in 1999, worked for a while in New York, and then got to L.A. in 2005. A track I did for [rapper] The Game was my first placement in 2004. My first tour with Kanye came after his *Graduation* album came out then I started working with him in the studio.

Kanye West showed a lot of confidence in you by making you his music director.

Yes. When we played live, he would stop the music and I would improvise on the piano as he would rap. I learned from being a jazz accompanist to really listen. We had this creative, spontaneous dynamic going on. In the studio, we did that when writing songs. We had a musical bond and could create together. As a rapper, he is very musical in the way he listens. He’s learned so much music from all the sampling he’s done. His appreciation for music and his tastes are really good. He taught me a lot about being an artist. Kanye is very good at making albums. After working on his albums, I tried to apply those ideas to the Fun. album.

I saw playing piano with Kanye kind of like playing jazz even though he’s not a jazz musician. Applying things in a different way can make the music interesting. Kanye is the ultimate artist and brings his vision to life in interesting ways. He never chooses the easy way out. When we’d work on a melody and I’d say, “Hey, this note could go there.” He’d say, “Everyone knows that note could go there. What’s a different note that we could use to make it special?” He’s never satisfied with the obvious. He wants the artistic choices, not just the ones that will work technically.

You’ve said that you got a strong work ethic from your father. Can you elaborate?

He was born in India and is a medical doctor and the mayor of our town—the longest-serving mayor in New Mexico history. From him I learned about staying organized and on task. You need to make a little progress every day. You don’t have to do something overnight, but if you work at it every day, you reach goals. It’s really very simple. Some people at Berklee would practice for eight hours a day, for three days, and then couldn’t keep up that pace. It’s better to practice one hour every day religiously and get the most out of that hour. You will get better. My dad knows that progress can’t stop; you have to keep going. He taught me to finish a job and do it right.

Did things start getting busy for you in 2009, after Jay-Z’s “Run This Town” won a Grammy?

Actually I became really busy when I was working with Kanye. The Alicia Keys song “Try Sleeping with a Broken Heart” was my first big song that I placed and produced on my own. I also did other things for her *The Element of Freedom* album. That was one of the first productions I did that Kanye said he thought was good.

How did you end up producing *Some Nights* for Fun.? They asked me about five times to get together. Finally