

E.VAX – Just Like Fire

As a teenager, E.VAX worked long hours as a cashier at a local gas station to save up for his first piece of music gear. A close friend—equally obsessed with music—was doing the same at a nearby pizza shop. When each finally had enough, the friend decided on an MPC, while E.VAX chose a guitar “In a lot of ways, that decision set me on the path I’ve followed ever since,” he says. “But sometimes I wonder what might have happened if I’d gone the other way.”

That other road—the one built on samples—is precisely the one he’s exploring today. E.VAX is Evan Mast, an American musician best known as one half of Ratatat, whose five albums left a lasting mark on the electronic rock scene of the 2000s and 2010s. Since then, Mast has built a steady career as a producer, working with artists such as Jay-Z, Kanye West, Travis Scott, Nas, Despot, and Teyana Taylor. His work with Kid Cudi—particularly on “Pursuit of Happiness”—produced one of the defining anthems of its era.

By 2021, with Ratatat on hiatus, he released his second solo album as E.VAX. The self-titled record, a product of the COVID era, leaned into a more melodic, emotive sound echoing his early experiments in electronic music. And now, five years later, he returns with Just Like Fire.

But back to that other road—the one that led, eventually, to this record in its current form. “I was feeling worn out working on other artists’ projects,” he says. “So many of my favorite tracks—the ones I’d brought to other artists—never made it off the hard drive. I wanted to be the one deciding which ideas moved forward and which were abandoned.”

Inspired by his work with sample-based producers, he revisited the albums he loved as a teenager—a time when, as he puts it, “my relationship to music was at its most intense, most vital, as essential as eating or drinking.” He acknowledges that many of those records sound dated now, but that wasn’t the point: “I wanted to tap into whatever made them feel so vital to me back then and bring that into the present.”

That’s when he began to think he might have it in him to make a sample-driven record of his own. An initial version of Just Like Fire took shape—rich, perhaps too rich. And what was bound to happen did: rights issues. Today, “there’s not much left of that original concept.” Pulp, The Breeders, and The Kinks for instance, are gone. The Cardigans, George Jackson, and Phyllis Dillon remain—but not in any expected form. The Cardigans’ classic “Lovefool,” rendered unrecognizable, underpins “Say,” one of the album’s standout tracks, both haunting and melancholic. Mast was eventually able to clear the sample after playing the track for Nina Persson directly.

Mast thrives on constraints—“the more limitations I can impose on myself, the easier it is to find creativity in those spaces”—so he developed a method: strip samples down to vocals alone, then place them in entirely new contexts, “changing the tone, the emotion, even the meaning—creating interesting contrasts.” Another self-imposed rule: isolation, far removed from the comfort of his New York studio.

For a few months, he set up in a hotel room in central Vietnam. Each morning, he recorded guitar instrumentals—simple chords and improvised melodies. “Guitar is such a reactive instrument,” he says. “Whatever you’re feeling comes through. And I’m not a good enough guitarist to fake it, so there’s inevitably something authentic in those takes.” He was driven

by the impulse “to move quickly, generate a lot of ideas, then set them aside long enough to forget what they sound like and then come back and hear them objectively.”

At night, he would sit on the hotel rooftop and revisit his demos. The tower featured inside the album artwork? “That’s the view I had when I listened to ‘BEO’ and ‘Wipe Your Feet at the Door’ and felt their impact for the first time.” “BEO,” which opens the record, may well be one of Mast’s finest creations—and wouldn’t have felt out of place on *Magnifique*, Ratatat’s most recent album.

Just Like Fire spans fourteen tracks—and fourteen moments, specific places where Mast knew a song had come together, that it made sense, that it resonated within him. “That became my thread for choosing the tracklist, with the hope that these songs will resonate with others too.”