



# SUNSHINE SUPERMAN

The psychedelic wisdom and supremely strange sounds of Devendra Banhart, high priest of the new L.A. scene

**BY VANESSA GRIGORIADIS**

Photograph by Lauren Dukoff

**O**N A WARM WINTER AFTERNOON IN THE LOS FELIZ hills of East Los Angeles, Devendra Banhart is flitting around his new house, a Seventies-style saltbox once inhabited by Graham Nash. He's fairylike, a rail-thin five feet 11 and 130 pounds, with an elegant, small-boned face, liquid brown eyes and thin-line tattoos splashed across various extremities, including a wriggling serpent etched on each foot - "the bifurcated path that leads to one place," he explains (more on this later). Banhart doesn't have a car at the moment, because he gave away his biodiesel Mercedes to a friend, and he's just hoofed it back from lunch with the raven-haired singer of a local band, West Indian Girl. It seems like the two of them are together, but he shakes his head. "I feel like an old lady, like the artist

Agnes Martin, who I heard was celibate her whole life," he says. "She was like, 'In my last life, I probably did a lot of boning, so this time I'm focusing on my artwork.'"

For most of this decade, Banhart has been considered the leader of the "freak folk" scene, an amorphous collection of earthy bands and singers like Joanna Newsom, Vetiver and Animal Collective. Banhart plays both the shaman and the idiot savant, a bushy-bearded sex symbol of new-school hippiedom who once dated Natalie Portman. But recently he's gathered a new group of musicians around him – from Beck to the-strokes' Fabrizio Moretti and Julian Casablancas – who have created a kind of proto-Gotham in the eucalyptus-scented hills east of Hollywood.

*What Will We Be*, Banhart's latest album, ranges from Led Zeppelin caterwauls to a ballad in the lost language of California's Pit River Indians. It's also Banhart's most well-crafted rock record yet: Over six albums, Banhart has moved away from collections of warbling free-form ditties about spiders and reincarnation toward shorter, sharper songs. "Devendra has grown more patient," says his drummer, Greg Rogove. "The early recordings were very extemporaneous, but now he takes some time with lyrics and works on structure with the band."

That's not to say that Banhart isn't still a hippie – he just wants to be very clear that he's not the cartoon version of one, a space case making tinctures and baking bread. In fact, the thought that he might be clas-

sified that way in pop culture makes him "snowball into an avalanche of self-aware insecurity and terror," he says. "I'd like to apologize to the hippies for being considered someone who can speak on their behalf," he adds, spacing out his words so they come off as a little ironic, though he isn't joking in the slightest. "I don't wear patchouli, and I smell too good to be a hippie." He shudders at the mention of yoga and thinks that macrobiotic food is "the most insipid shit ever," an opinion forged as a busboy at Angelica Kitchen in New York, "cleaning carrot-ginger dressing off the plates of the most neurotic human beings on the planet." He doesn't even smoke pot: "Unless, you know, *Pootie Tang* or *White Chicks* is on." He lets out a light laugh. "People are always giving me weed after shows, and I don't want to let them down, so I'm like, 'I'm going to go smoke the shit

out of this – but alone, sorry. You should've seen me a minute ago! I just smoked some hydro kush, man. It was sick." Then he shifts uneasily in a chair. "You know, the last show we played in L.A., we had all electric instruments, and I played a fucking keyboard, but the reviews said, 'They brought their brand of folk music to the House of Blues.' I thought that was amazing. Wow." He covers his eyes with one hand. "What do I have to do to not be that guy?"

**A**T HIS CORE, BANHART IS AN urban aesthete, an art-school kid and street skater influenced by the Incredible String Band, Tropicália and the Fugs. He's also the son of a fashion model from Caracas, Venezuela, who was such a free spirit that she'd pull stunts like peeing next to the car when dropping him off at school. "I was mortified," he says. "What if someone sees my mom's vagina peeing in the street?" A conversation with him can be like picking through his garbage can, looking for scraps of paper on which he's scribbled some thoughts. In the course of five minutes, he will careen from whispered excitement about Harmony Korine's forthcoming film *Trash Humpers* to reciting a William Blake poem to admiration for R. Kelly ("Somehow his music is so good, I like to imagine the little girl said, 'Please pee on me'"). He says that *What Will We Be* is inspired by tissue. "I was blowing my nose on some Kleenex, and

chuckles. "In retrospect, Bonnaroo is not a bad place to be roofied, because they are gentle and kind, those mountain-lovers."

Banhart was born in Texas in 1981; when he was a toddler, he says, his father was sent to prison for five years (he declines to elaborate on the charges, only saying that the crime was not violent). His first name was bestowed by Prem Rawat, an Indian guru popular in the Seventies; his middle name, Obi, was divined when his mother saw Alec Guinness come onscreen in *Star Wars* while her son was kicking in the womb. "Prem Rawat teaches what Jesus says, essentially, that the kingdom of heaven is within," Banhart says. "The only rule is that the women choose their mates, and the men are only allowed to be castrated on Thursdays. And then of course there's the triple-circumcision thing, which means you sew open the tip. . . ."

After his parents split up, Banhart's mom high-tailed it back to Caracas, where she looked for work as a nutritionist while, he says, trying to ensnare a guy to support them. They were middle-class, at least by the standards of a highly corrupt South American city. "One end of the city is toilet-paper shanties, and the other is fecundate, glorious, verdant majesty, but three families own that part, and they live in Malibu," says Banhart. "I think I appreciate nature so much because that part stood above us constantly, this beautiful place, this powerful thing." A telecommunications expert who traveled the world for

## "People are always giving me weed," Banhart says. "I don't want to let them down, so I'm like, 'I'm going to go smoke this – but alone.'"

I thought, 'This used to be a tree.' So I told the tree in the past, 'Thanks for letting me blow my nose on your future.' I don't know if the tree knew it was going to be Kleenex, but maybe it did. It could exist in the fourth dimension, where time is one line."

This is all good-natured babble, because Banhart – while also being a fragile, nervous fellow – is the nicest person you'll ever meet, gracious, generous and deeply kind. "Devendra is a very Ginsberg-ian character, in that Allen gave away everything he had over and over, and a whole group did good work because of him," says Jay Babcock, editor of L.A. psychedelia magazine *Arthur*. Banhart is sunshiny and charismatic, even smiling as he tells a story about getting unwittingly dosed at Bonnaroo in 2007. "Halfway through the set, I rhymed 'hot' with 'pot,' and then I realized something was wrong," he says. "A golf cart came to take me away while I yelled out, 'Orphan limbs!' I woke up in a bed with a Subway sandwich near my head." He

business took over as his father, toting back CDs for the kid from across the globe, like Ali Farka Toure and Fela Kuti. "None of my friends' parents were listening to this kind of stuff," says Banhart. "I felt it was very exotic, this esoteric knowledge."

In 1994, when Banhart was 13, his stepfather scraped together enough cash to take the family out of Hugo Chávez's revolution and move them to California, where they settled into a guesthouse near Malibu. "I think he saved my life, and saved my mom's life," Banhart says of his stepdad. "My pop is the most important person in my life." But Banhart was shocked by what he found when he enrolled in Malibu High. "In Caracas, I was watching your movies, and they were documentaries to me," he says. "Cool, *The Lost Boys*, isn't that how it is? Corey Haim!" He shakes his head. "This was America, the most fetishized, idolized country in the world, and the kids in Malibu were rich, living in mansions – yet they were totally racist, close-minded,

uncultured hicks who acted like gangsters because Snoop Dogg just came out," he says. Were they racist to him? "Are you kidding me?" he asks, eyes blazing. "Are you taking a shit in my mouth?"

Alienated and confused – and already pretty "artsy-fartsy," he says – he decided to conduct a social experiment over the course of one week. On Monday, he wore a suit. "The kids were like, 'That's kind of weird. *Men in Black!*' I thought, 'Oh, that's the reaction, interesting.'" The next day, he put on baggy jeans and Timberlands, slicked back his hair and affixed a pearl earring to his left ear. "Dudes that hated me were like, 'Sup, dawg?'" he says. "Girls who never talked to me: 'Hey, who's that guy?'" The next day, he wore a basketball uniform and gave himself a fake tribal tattoo; after that, he cut open the inseams of his black jeans, painted his legs red and drew all over his shirt. On Friday, the climax: a frilly dress. "I've never been so nervous in my life," he says. "Kids wanted to



**Freaky Styley**  
Banhart – with ex-girlfriend Natalie Portman (1) and at Coachella in 2009 (2) – moved to Venezuela with his mother (3) when he was four. At Santa Monica High (4), Banhart took up skateboarding and the guitar.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANTOINETTE CAU/ABACA USA; MICHAEL BUCKNER/GETTY IMAGES; LAUREN DUKOFF; COURTESY OF DEVENDRA BANHART

beat me up: 'Where's that superfag? Let's get him!' It was very scary."

He transferred to Santa Monica High and started skateboarding on the famed Santa Monica Courthouse steps. "I got really into the music on skate videos, like [legendary skater] Steve Olson used 'Quicksand' from *Hunky Dory*, by David Bowie," says Banhart. (He recently shot his own skate video.) He picked up the guitar and hung out on the beach promenade at mom-and-pop record stores soaking up music. "Blues wasn't something a major label was trying to sell with shitty-ass production – it was Mississippi John Hurt, and it really got to me," he says. "Or I'd get a ska compilation with the Skatalites, Alton Ellis and Horace Andy. All these dudes, I'd just go from one to the next, finding out who they were."

After high school, Banhart landed an art-school scholarship but dropped out two years later, after a letter from his biological father. (They rarely speak to each other these days.) "I've never met anybody

on my biological father's side other than him," Banhart says. "I just found out my grandmother's name last year." His father wanted to make things right, buying Banhart an airplane ticket to anywhere in the world. Banhart, who had begun recording demos, chose Paris, in hopes that all the girls would look like Jean Seberg in *Breathless*. He brought \$600 and a borrowed four-track recorder. When he ran out of money, he stood outside a Sonic Youth concert to find someone who would let him crash on a couch; after he overstayed too many welcomes, he began sleeping in the subway. Then, he heard that Vashti Bunyan's 1970 psychedelic-folk classic *Just Another Diamond Day* was going to be reissued on CD for the first time. He put it in his Discman for a month. "When I was hungry and didn't have food, or was tired and couldn't sleep, I was happy because I was listening to that record," he says. "It changed my life."

Banhart returned to California and after an encouraging letter from Young God Records in Brooklyn, boarded a plane for New York with another \$600 and his guitar. "In my head, I was going to be Lou Reed, a sea urchin in the sewers," he says. The reality was an expensive city in which he knew no one. At an underground music festival, he repeated his Paris act, asking around for an apartment he could cook at or clean in return for shelter. The best offer was a squat in an abandoned salsa club in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. "It had a toilet that you had to fill up with the sink to flush and a room in the back covered with all sorts of horrible graffiti," he says. "It was very scary." The brightness drains from his face. "When you're homeless, no one gives a fuck about you. When you don't have a single dollar, no one gives a fuck about you. That gesture of 'Play me a song.' That was nice. You want to stay on the couch? That's what was saving my life. A bit of kindness."

As a companion, he bought a mouse he named Mr. Journey. "It was lonely; he was two bucks," says Banhart. He made a cardboard box for Mr. Journey and gave him a thimble of whiskey. "He wasn't into me, though," he says. "I eventually let him go."

Young God signed Banhart a few months later, and since then, he's toured more or less constantly and watched his audience grow from record-collector dudes who would rag on him for not being a folk purist, to everyone from the Black Crowes' Chris Robinson and Karl Lagerfeld. But he's still living for that little bit of kindness. "It's important to find something magical, beautiful and spiritual in everything," he says. "And I know I'm sounding like a hippie right now, but I am interested artistically in things that are imbued with a mystical sense to them. That's the vein and bane of my life, what I'm attracted to and move toward."

It's a couple of weeks later, and we're sitting in his house again as [Cont. on 63]

## DEVENDRA BANHART

[Cont. from 45] he orders Hawaiian pizza. "I don't normally eat meat, but Hawaiian pizza is so friendly, so peaceful," he says, sitting at his kitchen table in a crisp white shirt buttoned all the way up and one red sock, the other green ("I'm an accountant who really loves Mexico," he says, explaining the outfit). He's tired from two weeks of afternoon rehearsals with his band for their tour. "You know, our practices have been three days for a decade," he says. "We'd just have the first three shows be shit - I mean, I'm sure all of our shows will always be shit - but for the first time, we've dissected who does what in which part." He smiles. "It's such a beautiful feeling the first time you get it right, when everything is locked in and the harmony works, because you can't be anywhere else but there."

For this album he worked with an outside producer, Band of Bees' Paul Butler, but he second-guesses himself a lot, often because he doesn't want his music to be too easy to understand. These days, Banhart is trying to write down his ideas, to focus his thoughts. He brings out a small yellow lined notepad. "Our children's children will be astonished by our gas-related inhibitions," he reads, out loud. "See, I wrote that down because in the future, there might be a parking space and a farting space - machines where you go and fart, to make hundreds of hours of energy."

He flicks the pages, through a lot of notes about science: quantum physics, general relativity, the Large Hadron Collider. "I'm genuinely interested in science," he says. "I feel that I'm working in a realm that is moving toward the mystery, and science is trying to dissect the mystery." This is Banhart's "bifurcated path" - the idea that the ecstasy of music and the rationality of science are both valid ways of fathoming the universe, especially since they draw us ever closer to the conclusion that humans and the Earth are more intertwined than we thought possible. In fact, a week before Banhart began recording

*What Will We Be*, he found, oddly, that he couldn't open his mouth. "Couldn't eat a Brazil nut," he says. A doctor gave him muscle relaxants, but it didn't help. A friend recommended ayahuasca, the visionary vine of shamans that produces an eight-hour trip to unknown realms - and, suddenly, his mouth popped open. Two snakes, like the double helix of DNA, are a symbol of the animating spirit of ayahuasca, which is considered by some to contain the essence of life. The tattoos on his feet honor the experience. "But you must be very careful when talking about this, because it is essential to do ayahuasca with a shaman," explains Banhart. "You know, one of my realizations was, 'The baby doesn't realize it's a baby.' I kept saying that over and over."

That's as clear as he gets about his spiritual beliefs. "I'm really just excited about the banana aspect of God," he says, a smile playing on his lips. "They are perfectly wrapped up for me, I peel them open, and there's delicious fruit full of potassium. Then I throw it away, and it disappears back into the Earth. Wow."

It's quiet here tonight, with Banhart's roommate out on a date. (When asked what he considers romantic, he says, "Napoleon telling Josephine, 'I'll be home in two weeks. Don't bathe.'") But he still doesn't feel completely comfortable. Recently, he visited an old house with peeling paint and crooked windows, and he realized that this beautiful home, which he's been renting for just two months, is too fancy for him - particularly his bedroom, where he gazes out the plate-glass windows at an expanse of Los Angeles skyline. "I can finally afford to live in a nice house, but it's just not me," he says, stabbing a finger at some of the Seventies-chic fixtures. "Look at those lamps. They're from . . . Disasterville." He shudders. "I don't know - the best songs I wrote were in the squat." Until he moves out, though, he wants to switch bedrooms, to a tiny space off the kitchen. "That room is a cave, a hovel," he says. "That's where I want to be." 



# are you ready?

## To talk about a world that used to have:

- Polar bears
- More snow
- Abundant trout
- Cooler summers

These gifts of nature could disappear if we don't reduce the impacts of global warming. Cutting carbon emissions that cause global warming by at least 2% a year will make a big difference. We can all do our part.

Start now by switching to energy-efficient light bulbs, appliances and cars. Or plant a tree.

We need to create a healthier future our kids will thank us for.

Find more 2% tips at  
[nwf.org/personalsolutions](http://nwf.org/personalsolutions)

Inspiring  
Americans  
to protect  
wildlife  
for our  
children's  
future.

