

A New Angle

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Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today I'm speaking with John Wicks and Jesse Phillips. These two Montana musicians have come together to form Flüffy Bünny. A band that, as John and Jesse say, defies industry norms. It's cool to see two seasoned vets of the music industry tapping into new creative energy from their homes in Montana. John, Jesse, thanks for joining me.

Jesse Phillips Yes, thanks for having me here for my first time.

Justin Angle Yeah, so tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do? John, we've heard this from you before, but let's hear it again.

John Wicks I'm a Navy brat, so I moved around a lot. When my dad retired from the Navy, we moved up to Seattle and lived on Bainbridge Island, and I grew up on Bainebridge and then in Seattle, predominantly.

Justin Angle Jesse, how about you?

Jesse Phillips I spent my entire childhood, mostly about four hours north of here, so southeastern corner of British Columbia, northwestern corner of Montana. I graduated from high school in Eureka up in Lincoln County. My family has always kind of been, they are land people, they worked the land. My dad did various things growing up. He was a logger and forestry worker. They've dabbled in ranching, all that kind of stuff. I laugh. as soon as I could and moved to New Orleans. And then I spent, I guess the next 20 years living in the South and I moved back to Montana about five years ago.

Justin Angle It was the move to New Orleans to study music.

Jesse Phillips I think it was just to go someplace that wasn't here, to be honest with you at that point, because growing up in rural Montana slash British Columbia, I mean, that was right on the cusp of the internet age, so we didn't just have access to everything like we do now. It felt pretty backwoods, and I feel differently now, but back then I thought it was kind of a cultural void for a kind of creative, artistically inclined kid growing up. sticks up here, there wasn't a ton of opportunities, so I just wanted to go somewhere else.

Justin Angle Take us through a little brief musical bio.

Jesse Phillips I've been playing in bands since I was 14 or 15, I guess. I'd say my first gig was probably playing the Eureka Junior High School graduation party. Once I got to New Orleans, I was still playing in band, but exposed to a lot of new sounds and stuff, as you would expect. New Orleans being what it is. I mean, it's pretty immersive when you live there, like you can see shows every night if you want. There's always good stuff going and yeah, I think it had a pretty profound effect on me and kind of changed the way I thought music should feel for sure. I was pretty fully inundated in the New Orleans thing, you know, all manner of like experimental jazz, funk music or R&B, whatever, you know, things are not very genre-specific down there, they're all kind of like... part of the same pool I guess you could call like black American music or southern rhythmic music or like whatever you want to call it. Yeah but I just ate it up for years and once I finally left New Orleans would have been after the big hurricane I landed in Alabama and that's where I sort of actually found a career playing music linking up with some of the guys I still play with down there now in the band called St. Paul and the Broken Bones based in Birmingham, Alabama to this day.

Justin Angle And for folks not familiar with your music, how would you describe St. Paul?

Jesse Phillips Southern, I don't know rhythm and blues psychedelic.

Justin Angle John, talk about your path.

John Wicks Growing up in Seattle, playing mostly jazz music, that was kind of, I was sort of a jazz Nazi. That's all I wanted to do. And eventually just to see how I stood against the best of the best, I moved to Boston to go to Berkeley College of Music. I was there for a year and then just ran out of money. I had to drop out. So I made the smart move of just moving to New York. I figured I'm already starving. I might as well be starving in New York in the hotbed of everything. So I didn't stay there for very long. Yeah. I sort of moved back to Seattle with my tail between my legs. But it was one of the best things that ever happened to me was sort of being humbled like that and moving back and then sort of be exposed to the Seattle music scene. The grunge scene was just starting to sort of fall off and I wasn't really a part of that. I knew a lot of the key players because I was making their coffee as a barista. But then just started work. Some of my best friends from Boston, from Berkeley, moved out to Seattle and sort of followed me back there. And we created bands that were kind of untypical for the time. It was jazz groups, improvisational groups that were playing rock clubs and just trying to push that boundary of just not playing cocktail gigs and restaurant gigs and. Just jazz stuff in general, wanting to play for a larger audience. And then through that, one of my best friends, a trumpet player named Chris Littlefield started to take me out to clubs and I started to just enjoy dance music and groove-oriented music and I really owe him everything at this point. Like he really exposed me to street music in the sense that it's okay to play music that everyone relates to and likes. It's okay to not. do the athletic version of music, you know, and who can play the most notes, which is kind of what the scene I was in. And then I found the challenge of just playing for large groups of people really special. I realized that's really inherent. The power of drums is making larger Aussies move and letting them have a good

time. I started getting the calls I had always hoped to get with. you know, Bruno Mars and CeeLo Green and started to play sessions more regularly. But I also noticed that during that time, a lot of my heroes, the drummers that I wanted to steal their gigs, essentially were starting to take touring gigs, guys like Matt Chamberlain and Josh Freeze. And I started to see that they were supplementing what was normally a very successful studio career, but they were taking Cakes with Soundgarden and with Sublime and...

Justin Angle Is this the time when sort of the economics of the industry started to shift toward money being made on the tour versus the record?

John Wicks Definitely the start of that. It was sort of the writing on the wall was, home recording was just starting to become more possible. And so studio budgets shrank and shrank. So as a result, a lot of the studio musicians weren't working as much or getting paid as much. So with that being said, coincidentally, I met Fitz and Fitz knew that my specialty was sort of recreating older 60s funk and Motown. style recordings, and then he heard about the Bruno Mars record, and he just called me for a gig at a place called Hotel Café. You know, that led to a 15-year band, which I was never planning on being in a band at all. Yeah, big hits and I never expected to be a part of anything like that. I just left, well, not just left. I left almost to the day two years ago. Yeah. Because I, you know it's kind of a case of be careful what you wish for, you might just get it. And coincidentally, my twin daughters were born almost on the same day I joined the band. Wow. It was like a week later. And so, as a result, I was on the road about two-thirds of the year, pretty much. And so I was missing out on a lot of monumental.

Yeah, it was really tough. And, but at the same time, it was really hard to complain, you know, because it was really awesome. So, and it was fun. I couldn't believe how many pinched me moments I had, but eventually I got to a point where sort of the business end of things sort of eclipsed the artistic end of things, which comes with a certain degree of success. and I was starting to... just not relate to it, and also just didn't want to miss out on any more of my daughter's stuff, you know. So yeah, I made that tough decision of bailing, but as has been my entire life, the leaps of faith that I choose to take always end up being the right thing.

Justin Angle We'll get to your teaching here in a moment, but first let's, how did you two meet? What were the circumstances and how long ago?

Jesse Phillips I think, I remember inviting you to a St. Paul show in 2019. We didn't really know each other at that time, but Kevin Leon, the drummer in St. Paul, he's, he is very immersed in drummer world and drummer world is, I don't know how to explain it, but it like seems like all these touring drummers know of each other, even if they don't now each other.

Justin Angle Is the bassist world similar? Do you guys all know each other?

Jesse Phillips I don't know bass players are weirdos. I feel like it's not on the same level I mean, yeah There is some of that like there are bass players that every bass player knows of and kind of steals from or whatever But but it's like this like these guys are all like DM in each other and

John Wicks Yeah, sending clips around all the time and stuff. It's a real pro hang, absolutely.

Jesse Phillips But I knew that John had lived here because, you know, he's famous and Kevin had said, we should invite him to the show, which I think was at the Wilma several years back. And so I just DMed John and invited him out, but he was busy. Fast forward a couple of years, maybe we had met once in the coffee shop or something, but then our bands got booked on a tour together, Fits of the Tantrums and St. Paul and the Broken Bones. So we ended up spending basically a month. on tour together on the road.

Justin Angle During that time does some idea of collaborating on something start to gestate and what does that look like?

Jesse Phillips Yeah I think so. We started talking about our mutual love of like riffs, like loud, fast, aggressive riffs. And that's sort of what ultimately ended up leading to the musical project.

John Wicks Also, just the fact that I have to say that tour where we did this co-billing with St. Paul, out of 15 years of touring, that was my favorite tour by far.

Justin Angle Hmm interesting.

John Wicks Because there was literally no ego. It was just all love and fun and just getting to hang out with these guys and just hear them every night. Actually hear someone who plays that music. They don't, they speak without an accent in that vernacular. You know, it's like the real deal. And I'm sort of a snob. So when I got to hear them play every night and hear Paul's amazing voice every night, it was just, it was so fun. They're all just such sweethearts and fun people. And then, yeah, I think I got to know Jesse better on that. We would go for runs together and, you know, go for coffee every day and got to hang out and got know each other better.

Jesse Phillips Side note, John knows where probably 90% of the good coffee shops are in major metropolitan areas. Yeah, it turns out. Every city of the United States. I mean, I remember.

Justin Angle That turns out, I mean I remember before Drum launched the coffee shop sort of feed from all your locations on tour was a great source of beta. Even now John will text me and be like.

Jesse Phillips Even now, John texts me and be like, Hey, I saw you're in Tucson. You should go down to check out this place.

John Wicks But yeah, I think, I don't know, I guess flash forward a little bit. I think the connection and the commonality that Jesse and I have is that. I don't think people quite realize

the following that St. Paul actually has. I mean, they're like hugely successful band. These guys fill seats because they busted their butts, you know, and they... Certainly no big radio is. St. Paul is amazing. But they garnered fans just because of how real they are, and the fans feel it every night. It's such a visceral experience hearing them play. And so they just you know, garnered fan by fan and got this huge audience. And it's just awesome. So anyways, Jesse and I sort of have that in common, but also with success comes sort of some creative constraints and I think we were both looking for something completely polar opposite than what we were each doing.

Justin Angle Let's just get right into what you're doing now because it is different. Yeah. And unexpected. And I know Jesse, you bumped at the term genre earlier, but talk about, okay, I'm gonna let one of you pronounce the name of the project first because I can't take myself seriously trying to say it. Are you trying to say it?

John Wicks You're gonna get scared? Okay, I'll say it.

Justin Angle Okay I'll say it, Flüffy Bünny. There you go did I get it?

Jesse Phillips Nice, yeah, you got lean a little more into the second umlaut. Oh, yeah.

John Wicks Okay. I don't know, I call it future punk. Future punk. I'm at a point in my life and my artistic career where I want to play music where you can't really hear the through lines of

the influences. And the stuff that we've done so far is sort of hitting that mark. When I listen back to it, I feel like I don't hear anyone else doing that. So that makes me really happy.

Justin Angle Can I press on that? Is that a sensation you experience listening back to your work or do you want that experience as you are making it? Oh yeah. You want to feel uninfluenced while you're interacting with drum kit or whatever it is you're.

John Wicks Yeah, that's a really good question. I think, I don't know if it's completely impossible to be unaffected as you're creating something.

Justin Angle Well, you're sort of the totality of all the effects.

John Wicks The hope is that whatever that vision is in your head as you're making it comes to fruition and doesn't come out sounding immediately like something else that you've heard before. And that right now at this stage of my life is the goal with anything, any music that I'm making. I want it to be completely unaffected if that's possible. And so I, with Jesse, have found a partner in that and he's willing to go anywhere, you know, musically and it's really awesome. Jesse, talk about the project from your perspective.

Jesse Phillips Similar to what John was just speaking to. Like with the St. Paul thing, it was just a songwriting project that I had with Paul Janeway, the singer. You know, it obviously kind of took on a life of its own and the band got bigger and more successful and there were more, not

constraints, but more parameters, I guess, to be aware of rather than just doing whatever you wanted and, you know, there was stakes involved. And I guess, like, when John and I first started... messing around with the flüff-ing, as we'll call it. It made me feel like I was like 15 just playing in a rock and roll band again. And I had sort of like forgotten what that was like. It doesn't matter, just play what you wanna play. If it's cool, if you think it's good, if John thinks it's a cool, then it is cool. And you don't gotta worry on anything about it beyond that. You know, there's no guardrails anymore to creativity. Basically, if we can't get it done. with John's drum kit and the four strings that I have, then probably just not gonna do it.

Justin Angle Did that experience of kind of going to a blank canvas with no rules changed your experience with St. Paul and your other bandmates? What are you taking from this that you're bringing back to that other crew?

Jesse Phillips I mean, I would say that it's probably helped just refresh my musical outlook a little bit in general. I appreciate that I am in a situation that I take for granted sometimes that is accessible and what it takes to do that and also what it take to sort of willfully ignore it and do the opposite of that. when you work in that world for a long time, you can really kind of get stuck into, okay, there's going to be an intro in this song, but it can't be more than 10 seconds long because somebody will press skip on Spotify if we don't get to the point in the first 15 seconds. Like there's all these kind of art of, we're not artificial. They're sort of real, but like parameters in place when you make, I always call it pop adjacent music. Like St. Paul's not a pop band, but as a songy song band in the more traditional sense. And so it's always okay,

intro verse, of course, there is just kind of this way that you navigate it that is completely obliterated in this band and it's just very refreshing and reinvigorating on so many levels.

Justin Angle So John, you mentioned you're on the other side of Fitts and the professional touring musician cycle of life, if you will, but now you're full-time teaching here at the University of Montana, College of Music, and teaching classes on songwriting and other aspects of the creative process. How has this experience informed your teaching work?

John Wicks First project that I had after leaving Fitts into Tantrums was with Jeff Ament doing Def Charlie, which similarly had no rules whatsoever. So that was kind of a palate cleanser in a way, getting to work with Jeff and having him be so open to anything and pushing me creatively to get outside my box that I'd been in. Then to be introduced to Jesse and do our thing, plus playing weird avant-garde music with Lauren Stillman, who's this world-renowned saxophonist that happens to live here, sort of rejuvenated my love for jazz music again. And just getting to do all of these things just prior to being offered the teaching position, teaching a songwriting class, was really great timing. Because I think had I not had these prior to teaching that class, I still would have been stuck. And I would have still not been able to express to the students just how important that freedom is and how to allow themselves to just be themselves and make mistakes. I needed that couple years of detox in order to remember. Like what Jesse just described, it feels like being a kid again. And I hold that so dear, and I want all of my students to protect that, you know? And the other thing I try to convey with them is to protect the ashes of what's been already done, but fan the flames of what could be. The only

way to do that is to allow your truly original voice to come out. And so I think if we're going to get any sort of innovation from here on out or new material that's really refreshing, it's that we're going to allow them to use their own voice. and make mistakes and keep the mistakes. Don't erase the mistakes.

Justin Angle When you're doing something like a collaboration like this, how does the decision to publish the work come about? Do you go into it with that intention or is it just like let's jam for a while, create something, and then see if it's worth putting out there?

Jesse Phillips I mean, there is something super satisfying maybe about sitting around at home and like writing something and being really proud of it, but it doesn't really feel like it's real until it's shared, you know, and until people are responding to it one way or another, even if they're just like, yeah, you know, most of my fulfillment beyond making it gets like the circuit gets completed when you play it in front of people or you share it in front of and that's when it feels like it's real to me. The interaction of the energy between what's coming from stage and what's happening with the other people in the room is still sort of the important part to me.

John Wicks Total agreement here. If you're writing for somebody because you think they're going to like it or you want them to like, that's a dead end. You're never going to get that. If you are making art that makes you smile, makes you laugh, makes you sad, makes whatever it makes you feel, as long as it's making you feel something, that is a value. But I think there is also something really to be said for what I call shipping it. You need to put it out and get it out

into the world because you really especially now when the avenues are so open to get your work in front of people easily to get here work in from the people it would be just silly for you to pride an audience of something that's truly original and that you have no idea if they're going to relate to maybe they don't doesn't matter just put it out i think there's something to be said just for working quickly and shipping it. and not overthinking it. And I think you get a truer sense of yourself by doing it. And then you just, you can kind of let it go at that point and just see what happens.

Justin Angle I know you bring that sensibility to the classroom. I really admire that. It was inspiring to sort of see you and Jeff preparing Def Charlie to go to the Ohana Festival, for example, and bringing students as your backup band. It was just the opportunities that you're creating for students is inspiring. And I can't help but maybe try to get Maddy over here, one of your students and the manager of this project on the mic for just a second. Maddy, tell us about your role in this project and why you're excited about it.

Maddy Yeah, I've known John for, I'd say probably a little over a year now. He originally came into our student group, or at the time it was called the university, Montana entertainment management student group. And he came and guest spoke in our group and then he just kind of kept in contact. And I don't know, I think I kind of grew an interest for the like management and like booking world of things. And then I don't know, I think we just kind. kept talking and he was telling me about this project with him and Jesse and now I've just kind of helped in whatever avenues I can that's mostly been like helping with their social media or getting things

together like this or helping them release their music yeah it's been fun I love just kind of doing this sort of thing so

Justin Angle Awesome. Folks want to learn more about Fluffy Bunny and see the music, listen to the music. However, where would you direct them?

Maddy Well, we have our Instagram up right now, our website, and we're on Spotify, Apple Music, all the platforms as well.

Justin Angle Yeah, thank you, Maddy. So, fellas, as we close here, how would you... Sounds like, I mean, maybe my question is irrelevant. I was going to ask, how do you define success? What I'm hearing is that you're already there. And how you measure, just even that word might be a misnomer, but like, how are you, what do you want to see this project become? Or has it already met its goals?

John Wicks I think from my perspective, I have to be a little bit careful about speaking about success. Yeah. Only because I think both Jesse and I are coming from a very fortunate place of being able to make a living doing this, right? Right. So... That being said, perhaps it's easier for me to say this, but I think pretty much what I described earlier as long as you are doing something that you think is good and putting it out, that to me at this point is success. And for me, where I'm at in my life and my career right now, doing something again that feels original and is pushing boundaries. is something that's really important to me, no matter the context,

whether it's Fluffy Boonie or any other music that I'm doing. That's just sort of become the priority at this point.

Justin Angle Jesse, what do you think about that?

Jesse Phillips Yeah, I mean, just getting, just creating something and getting it out into the world feels probably the first echelon of win. Sure, first hurdle. Yeah, beyond that, you know, I keep forgetting we've still only done three shows. In the entire history of this band. They were so good. And they've all been, you, know, very fun, strange, DIY, you now, it's a very different environment, but the fact that we do have people now that will come see us.

John Wicks Pretty much our crew at this. I was just thinking I have to set up my own drums, but we have a crew of all of his hockey team. We're really big within the hockey community.

Jesse Phillips Yeah, the hockey buddies and the mountain climbers. We've got those two demos covered.

Justin Angle Yeah, well Spotify probably has a targeting algorithm that can find mountain climbers and hockey players.

Jesse Phillips Just looks for dirtbags. No, I mean, ultimately, I would love for John and I to be able to take it on the road in some capacity or do, you know, a week or two out just in dirty,

nasty rock and roll dives. I think that would be my next level, my next echelon goal. But yeah, exactly. I think we probably could take it up to Lincoln County. There's some weirdos up there. I would appreciate it. I know. But we'll, uh, I think we've got some more music to record. that's sort of the next goal and You know, keep having the shows kind of trickle in till we're in a place where we're ready to pound the pavement a little more, I think.

Justin Angle One last question. We danced around the pronunciation, but why the name Fluffy Boonie? Where'd that come from?

John Wicks I just always thought oomlots were really funny. With two dots over a U or an O. Yeah, whether it was Motorhead or whatever. Yeah, so every time I said the name, I just would laugh. And when I told Jesse, he laughed really hard. So I thought that's it. That's the one. Yeah, that's really the whole goal. And really, the main reason is just so I can correct people when they say Fluffy Bunny. And so I could correct them by saying, no, I'm sorry, it's Flooffy Boonie.

Justin Angle Very good. Fellas, thanks for coming in.

Jesse Phillips Yeah, appreciate it. Thank you.

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you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen. Our presenting sponsors are First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications, and the University of Montana College of Business. Keely Larson is our producer, Maddie Jorden is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.