

# SOMBER WESTERN

Interviewed by **The Silver Age**, August 27th, 2024

Somber Western is the solo project of Ian McNair, a musician based in Philadelphia, PA. He recently reached his goal of releasing one song each month for a year and is currently working on two EPs and looking to start a band. For information about new releases and future shows, follow @somberwestern on Instagram and listen to Somber Western on Spotify.

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ALICIA LOPEZ: So then, you want to state for the record, your name, age, where you're based, and what instruments you play?

SOMBER WESTERN: Yeah. My name's Ian, and I go by Somber Western musically. I'm 31. I am based here in Philly. I just moved here, actually, from San Diego. I moved here in April. So, yeah, this will be the first house show. But I've met a few people, so I'm super familiar with the scene.

A.L.: Instruments you play?

S.W.: Oh, instruments. Yeah. I play a little bit of everything. I think I'm most competent on guitar now. But I play – I love drums. I play bass when I need to record bass. I play – I've played piano for many years, but I'm pretty incompetent at piano now. And I played trumpet. And what else? And vocals, I guess.

COLE GABORIAULT: How would you describe the genre or type of the music that you play?

S.W.: That's so hard. I think – I guess, like, indie rock, but I never really – I don't really necessarily want to be indie rock. It just kind of – like I was saying before, it kind of starts out acoustic, and then when I add drums and bass it ends up becoming indie rock. Yeah, but I would say I want to venture more into more soft, like, folksy-style eventually. But yeah, I kind of want to do a little bit of everything.

A.L.: So, Somber Western – how'd you come up with that name?

S.W.: Yeah, so it doesn't really mean anything. For many years, I've just written band names that I thought would be cool in my phone. Like, in my reminders. I use my reminders app for all my random notes. And then I finally recorded a song to put up on Spotify, and I needed a name. And I just did, like, reminder roulette. And I went to the top and flicked it and clicked on it, or it showed up, and that was it. And... I may have, like, ignored the first one. I don't remember. I just picked the first one that sounded like a decent name. And then I honestly didn't like it. But I just stuck with it because I needed something, and then now I kind of like it.

C.G.: You've grown into it, I suppose. How long have you been playing music?

S.W.: I've been playing since I was five - I started piano at five. And then I started writing probably when I was like 13. Yeah. So, like, classic music training, I guess, at five. But then writing and production probably at 13, 14.

C.G.: And how long as Somber Western specifically?

S.W.: Somber Western has existed since June of last year.

A.L.: So then, did you go to school? If so, what'd you go for?

S.W.: Yeah, I went to UC San Diego. That's how I ended up in San Diego. And I studied structural engineering, and I have not done anything with it.

A.L.: Where are you from originally?

S.W.: Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area.

C.G.: So, on the theme of sort of coffee house type stuff, do you have any pets?

S.W.: Yeah. I do have a dog named Melly. And she's four.

A.L.: What type of dog?

S.W.: I think she's a pitbull mix. She's, like, your classic street dog rescue, but she's brindle colored, and she's like 50 pounds. She's medium.

C.G.: What would you say are your comforts in life?

S.W.: Oh man. I really enjoy a cup of coffee. Piano music – just, like, any soft jazz or classical piano. I make – I'm learning to make homemade chai. And that's so comforting, just because I have, like, a mortar and pestle situation, and I'm buying the spices and grinding it down. And I'm still perfecting the recipe, but it just, like, fills the house, and it's just the warmest... yeah. The warmest both, like, literally, but also emotionally.

C.G.: Do you have any discomforts in life?

S.W.: Yeah, a lot. Way too many that I'm trying to work out. But... yeah, like, I'm pretty claustrophobic. But I battle with – if I'm being, like, very soft with myself, then I'll avoid these things, but usually I'm trying to face it head on. And for, like, claustrophobia and social anxiety and flying, which is kind of a mix of both.

C.G.: What are your musical influences?

S.W.: Yeah. There's a lot. I would say... I love the band Whitney. Huge Strokes fan. I feel like The Strokes kind of find their way into everything. Let's see. Have you heard of Peter Cat Recording Co.?

C.G.: I have not.

S.W.: They're great. They're a really cool, like, indie, but really almost, like, crooner, old-school sound. And a lot of '70s and '60s funk and, like, your classic love songs. I'm blanking on people's names exactly, but, like, Aretha Franklin and Etta James. Those would also fall into my comforts.

A.L.: So what does your music writing process look like? How do you start that?

S.W.: Yeah, usually – so, I try to write most days, just, like, as a practice of being okay with writing and accepting what I'm writing. But usually when a song comes out, it's usually because I'm just walking down the street and a melody comes to mind, or some sort of bass line. And then I typically – I'm probably doing this wrong, but I typically write it in the recording process. So I'll just record what I came up with on an instrument and then start building on top of that as I record, and then, like, messing around with improvised lyrics. Or then revisiting things I've written before and seeing what thematically works. That's been pretty reliable, but oddly probably half the stuff that I've actually released were actually just written first, like – I used to go to this coffee shop in San Diego and write every morning, and a few songs that I finished and released came out of, like, humming to myself in the coffee shop, and then going to the bathroom and recording a voice note, and then writing the whole thing in one session there, that day.

A.L.: Yeah, I saw – and maybe this is out of date, but you're releasing one song a month? Is that still right?

S.W.: Well, so, I just stopped. I just gave myself a break from that. That was what got me – that was basically what pushed me to start releasing music, was I just, like, committed to releasing a song every month. Because I got to a point where I had enough songs and enough bits and pieces of songs that I knew I could finish at least one a month for a year if I really pushed through and, like, stopped being a perfectionist. Yeah, so last June I started that, and I released a song every month except for December or something, or January.

A.L.: Congrats.

S.W.: Thank you.

A.L.: That's very impressive.

S.W.: Yeah, it was honestly such a helpful lesson in just, like, letting things go, just pushing it forward.

C.G.: So then how do you approach writing lyrics for music specifically?

S.W.: Yeah. Usually I do it vocally. Like, I will – there's, like, sentences – I don't know – do you ever wake up and just have a sentence stuck in your head? That happens a lot. Same with the band names. My reminders is full of one-liners that I'm like, "oh that would make a really good chorus line or something." So sometimes I build around that, and then a lot of other times it's just from, like, free writing and just, like – I have a journal that I'll just star the margin when I think this would be a useful thing later on. And sometimes I'll go back and build around that. And other times it's just – like, everything comes out at once, and it's unstoppable.

A.L.: So then, are there specific themes that you come back to over and over in your writing?

S.W.: Probably not intentionally, but it's – so far, it's been – it was relationships, like, love and relationships and heartbreak, and a lot of self-deprecation, like, things I did wrong. And then lately it's been very existential. It's been like, "what am I doing?" That's a really big theme. I don't think that's going to end anytime soon.

C.G.: What are you currently working on? You said you're giving yourself a break for the one song a month, which is probably not a bad idea. That's quite a schedule to be on. But what sort of things are upcoming?

S.W.: Yeah, right now I'm working on gigging more, so this is part of that. And I'm working on – I really want to start a band. I think it's going to be really awesome to collaborate with people. And being new here, meeting people as well. So I'm definitely looking to start a band. And I'm also working on two EPs very slowly. One is, I think, just going to be covers. Just, like, songs that have never left me from my life. And the other one is going to be probably acoustic, like, very minimalistic. Like, vocals and guitar, and maybe piano.

C.G.: Before we get to our last question, what kinds of hobbies/interests do you have? Things that you do outside of music? For work?

S.W.: Yeah. Hobbies... well, I guess my dog takes up a lot of my time. I do a lot of walking. And I've been reading a lot. I'm getting into – I'm reading this book right now by V.E. Schwab. It's, like – I don't know – the genre is called dark academia. I feel like it's kind of like elevated Harry Potter, which is cool. But I'm also trying to go back and read Harry Potter. But yeah, reading. I am perfecting my Chai recipe, I am... let's see... I do work. I'm a data analyst during the day. Yeah, so that takes up a lot of time. I don't want to talk about that though. Yeah, what else? That's pretty much it. Yeah, just trying to explore, exploring Philly a lot. And New York. Yeah, trying to make friends.

A.L.: Why are you a musician?

S.W.: Wow. Why am I a musician? I honestly think that... I just need music. I can't – I don't know how to – like, even if I'm having the worst morning ever, listening to music just snaps me right out of it. It just has a power that – as a kid I felt like – I was often moved to tears with music, and I didn't really know why. And then when I discovered the idea of creating it – it's just so powerful. I don't know. I can't really – I guess I can't really put it to words, but... yeah. I feel like I need it.

C.G.: Is there anything else that you definitely want us to include that we should be asking about, you want us to ask you about, anything?

S.W.: I don't think so. That was awesome. Good questions. I don't know if, like – plugging that I really want to jam with people. I'm just totally open to meeting people and getting really involved with the community.