

Bandologie

Interview



Daren Taylor, Noah Harmon, Anna Bulbrook, Steven Chen, Mikel Jollett

The Airborne Toxic Event

February 01, 2011, "White Trash", Berlin, 33 minutes

Audio (original interview in English): www.bandologie.de/the_airborne_toxic_event.html

Nils Kolonko: Welcome the Airborne Toxic Event, to Bandologie. I'd like to introduce myself very quickly this time and uh, your band also quick. (Note from Nils: We started the recording twice for technical reasons). I'm Nils Kolonko. I wrote a book for musicians and it includes hints and tips for the music business, how to establish your band in the music business. So this is Noah, bass player of the Airborne Toxic Event, Mikel Jollett from the Airborne Toxic Event. You founded the band in 2006 and then built up a team of musicians. Your debut album was released in 2008. After touring for about 300 gigs you played a sold out show in the Walt Disney Concert Hall. On the way you played Lollapalooza and all kinds of other stuff. There was a documentary done after your debut album and soon there will be a second album of yours. I just forgot, you sold about 300,000 copies of your debut album, which is „pretty good“ for a debut. [laughter] (Note from Nils to all young musicians: We laughed because the sales are extremely high for a debut.) All right, so let's begin with the first question. As I said, in December 2006 you (Mikel) founded the Airborne Toxic Event. You built up a great musical team as well as partnerships with your management

and your label. How do you find and choose the right people to work with? For example, how did you meet Pete Galli and by what criteria did you choose him as your manager?

Mikel Jollett: Uh, he's a hustler. Our manager hustles. He understands his job is to create opportunities for the band. He's a young guy. You know, we were dealing with some folks that were kinda, like ...

Noah Harmon: Old school music people.

Mikel: And they would be like, with the big cigar, like, "I'm gonna make you a star, kid. Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna get you on that American Bandstand." [laughs] (Note from Nils: An old american variety show that was produced by Dick Clark Productions from 1964–1989)

Nils: How did you find him?

Mikel: We got approached by a lot of managers. We were actually with Coldplay's manager for about three weeks and it just wasn't right for us. It just like, big, bright management and all that kinda, they just, our manager is, like, a young guy and he's, like, scrappy, hungry, really, really smart, and we just liked him. I mean, he was very ambitious, but he's also extremely detail oriented on the day to day. And we felt that that made more sense than trying to go with, like, Mr. Big, Mr. Big Business Guy.

Mikel: And Pete is the kinda guy who founded his own management company before he was, you know, he works in context with a lot of different things. But he was, you know, he's a self-made man.

Mikel: Yeah. Yeah, he is.

Nils: I was just gonna say, a self-made guy. So you chose him by sympathy and ...

Mikel: Not sympathy, just, he's a hustler. You know, we felt like he was the right fit. We also just liked him, too. It didn't hurt that we liked him.

Noah: And he's a good guy.

Nils: And you found that he's a self-made guy and all into the details (and so on).

Mikel: Absolutely.

Nils: Soon after the band was founded in December 2006 Rolling Stone magazine named your band one of the top 25 bands on Myspace. In what way did you present your music on Myspace at that time?

Mikel: What was funny is I think there only are 25 bands on Myspace any more.

Noah: Yeah, which is, you know, there used to be a ton, but now it's, it's like, like just ...

Mikel: Abandoned civilization.

Noah: Like, us, and like ten other people. It's really sad.

Mikel: At the time there were a lot, though. Uh, I don't know, dude. That was a contest we entered. Like, it was some link, we sent in a link. I think it was a slow news week at Rolling Stone and so it ...

Noah: It was Christmas week. It was Christmas week.

Nils: So it was a contest. It was not chosen by the guys from, it was chosen by the guys but it was not randomly chosen from all the Myspace bands, but from the ones who sent in a link?

Mikel: I think about 100,000 bands sent in a link.

Nils: Oh.

Noah: It was an editorial decision on their part.

Nils: But in between 100,000 bands. So how did you present your music at that time?

Mikel: We just recorded it and sent it out. I mean, you know, I think the premise of your question is how did we sort of game it, and we didn't really. You know, we just kinda like, you know, there's a lot of rules to be followed, but at the end of the day you just have to put your heart and soul into a song and if you put your heart and soul into a song then none of those rules matter. I think it's just, it's a matter of, like, people, people know the difference, by, you can hear it. And I don't, I can't tell you why that's the case, you know what I mean, they just do.

Nils: Right.

Mikel: So like, I don't think it was, I think they heard a song and they liked it.

Nils: So you didn't have any special presentations or videos or graphics?

Mikel: No.

Noah: No, at...

Nils: Just, just the music.

Mikel: It was just, like, a song and we, I wrote it and we recorded it.

Noah: And mostly Mikel had recorded most of – No, all of the songs you'd done 100% of the guitars on your laptop at home at that point.

Mikel: Yeah. It was just, like, home recordings and stuff.

Nils: That's quite important to know for newcomer musicians. You recorded all the songs on your laptop in quite final versions with a guitar, right?

Mikel: Yeah. Yeah, there was a lot of stuff. I mean, we'd use studios to track a drum, but that was, this was just the demo, you know, which became our EP, which is basically our demo. I don't know why anybody would need to pay big money for a studio in 2011. It just

doesn't make sense to me. I mean, maybe you'll get, like, an extra 10% better sound out of your drums. That's about it.

Noah: Yeah.

Mikel: And if you have access to good guitars and good synthesizers, that's good too.

Noah: I mean, that's a big part.

Mikel: Otherwise, it's not that important, though.

Noah: I think a lot of the time people forget that having a really nice studio isn't actually gonna make you play any better, or your songs be any better ...

Mikel: Yeah, that's stupid.

Noah: ... which is really the most important thing.

Mikel: It's a waste of money.

Noah: Yeah, it is.

Nils: Yeah, I mean, you kind of, in my opinion you used (original: „made“) a kind of trick on (original: „with“) your first album – it wasn't really a trick – but you recorded all the stuff live, so that put you under the pressure, maybe (you can explain that a little further) ... ?

Mikel: Yeah, so we did live recordings for our first record. Some of that was just by necessity. People had, you know, we only had an hour to record in the studio that we were recording in that we were borrowing from or whatever and that was the hour and we did a take and that was the take and that was what was on the record.

Noah: Yeah.

Nils: But obviously it was good.

Mikel: Yeah, we also, we had been playing live for a while and we're mostly a live band, and so we wanted to capture what we were doing live in the studio, so you know, plug 'em in. Are the mics on? Great, start. Okay. Again, if you've got a good song or if you've composed a good arrangement that brings it to life for people, you don't need that many bells and whistles. Just play your song.

Nils: In my opinion it was quite clever of you because that separated you from thousands of other bands who cut in Pro Tools for hours and so on. So your sound probably, it differs ...

Mikel: Sloppier.

Nils: And it sounds kind of 70's because you recorded it live.

Mikel: I think it's just sloppy.

Noah: Yeah, and it, well, we probably would have used a lot of Pro Tools if we could have, you know, if we had the opportunity, but it wasn't, like, it was, that's what sounded good and so when, you know, we really come from a place where if it sounds good then you don't need to redo it with a vintage guitar or whatever, out of a specific amplifier or anything. If it happens to be a broken guitar with a missing string and you record it and it sounds good, there's no rulebook that says, "Well, you have to redo it once you get to the studio." If it sounds awesome, then it sounds awesome.

Mikel: Yeah, that's just stupid. There's like, really smart people that don't understand that. It's really weird.

Noah: It is very weird.

Mikel: They're like, "Oh, if you want to get a big sound you need a 1976 Fender Strat. You gotta run it through an 8x10 patched to an AC30 head that's been cranked past the ..."

Nils: Yeah, all the technical discussions ...

Mikel: And you're like, "Bro, just play the fucking chord."

Noah: This is some guitar out of an amp and it sounds really good. Can we make it sound like ...

Nils: And it sounds (great).

Noah: can we, okay, so all that fancy stuff, can we make it sound like that.

Nils: Did your classical background, (I meant) your jazz background on the bass, did that influence the decision? (Note from Nils: Noah studied music, he degreed in upright bass)

Noah: I mean, probably subconsciously for me personally.

Mikel: Subconsciously, yeah.

Noah: I mean, Mikel likes to put me on the spot for anything, but it's not like, he would do that with, you know, he does it with everybody. We're all, it's always like, what's the limit we can push, whether it's, you know, arrangement-wise from, like, a whole band standpoint or, like, how you're gonna play a part or what kind of part you can play. And I think that's really important, to have somebody who's like, "Okay, so this is hard. Okay, we'll let's make it even harder and let's do that."

Mikel: [laughs] Well, what's awesome is Noah can do it. Like you can tell him, he'll be like middle of the song and I'll be like, "Okay, double time it. Okay, make it sort of Indian. Okay, now add some more hammering. Okay. Okay, now take everything you're doing and do it three times as fast." And he'll be like this...

Noah: And backwards. And then change key.

Mikel: And I'll be like, and he'll just do it, because he's a great musician.

Noah: But it's great, I mean, it's an important thing to, like, you know, not just push yourself but your band mates as well and I think that it's, it really works out for us well.

Nils: I'd like to put one question first. You (Mikel) spoke about pushing the boundaries and you said in another interview that you can reach certain abilities that you thought you never had. Is that by pushing, by outside pushing, or how do you do that?

Mikel: I mean, you can become the best apple pie baker in the world if you bake an apple pie every day. You know what I mean? Like, you just have to make a decision to do it by whatever means you have. For some people that's, you know, rehearsing ten hours a day. For some people that's recording ten hours a day. What I will tell you is it takes a long time to get good at something and, you know, people who think you're born with talent are just wrong. You're just, you develop talent. You know, wasted talent's the most abundant resource in the world. [laughter] You gotta, like, hey, like, people think, "Oh, when I was 15 I did this thing and people thought it was sort of charming," and they're, like, 25 and still doing the same damn thing. You have to get better. And the only way you get better is by practicing.

Noah: And doing it, and doing it over and over again.

Mikel: Again and again and again, 10,000 hours. Spend 10,000 hours baking apple pies and you can make a really good apple pie.

Noah: Spend 10,000 hours playing a rock and roll show. I mean, the fucking Beatles were playing for three or four sets a day ...

Mikel: In Hamburg ...

Nils: In Hambug. I was born in Hamburg.

Noah: Oh yeah! I mean, they recorded – Excuse me, they played for hours and hours a day, many sets.

Mikel: Yeah, seven hours every day.

Nils: I think they played two sets of eight hours a night or something. (Note from Nils: Sorry, I was a little confused and focused on the next question at that moment.)

Mikel: They played seven hours every day.

Nils: A day and night.

Noah: And did that for years before they recorded a single note.

Mikel: And then people said, "Oh, you guys are really talented." And they're like, "Well, we've been playing seven hours a day for three fucking years."

Noah: "Fuck you. We know every pop song. We know every song." [laughter]

Nils: Yeah, yeah. There's a nice little anecdote about the Beatles. They were introduced to Decca Records and they were declined because in 1962 Decca Records told them „Guitar bands are on the way out“, 1962! (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Beatles'_Decca_audition for details)

Mikel: That's funny. NME told us that last year.

Noah: Yeah, we got that before.

Nils: And it repeats since then (original: „after that“). And your lyrics and your music obviously enthuse people. You said about songs that, "What's on the core of it isn't all this bullshit about Internet, mp3, whatever. It's people connecting thus another person." So, what's your advice for songwriters and producers to write a great song and make a great recording.

Mikel: Spend 10,000 hours doing it.

Nils: All right.

Mikel: I'm serious. Like, sit down tomorrow, decide you want to be a songwriter, and go about acting like your life depended on it. And, you know, if you – It's really hard. It's actually, like, really hard. And I think, you know, people wanna – but they're always – People are always testing to see if they have the talent for something and then they're like, "Oh," and they do something and then they're trying to ask themselves, "Do I have the talent for this?" and they're hoping that, like, through minimal effort they have some innate talent. And like, it's true that one in every, like hundred million people have that. You have a Mozart every now and then, but most of us aren't Mozart. The other nine hundred ninety-nine million, you have some talent and you have to develop it. So, I mean, you know, what can I say? Spend a lot of time. Make it your business. Listen to a lot of songs and then forget, lot of great songwriters. Listen to Bruce Springsteen, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, and then forget about them. You know, listen to a lot of, go to a lot of shows. Write a thousand songs.

Nils: And then forget about them? (Note from Nils: Of course I knew what he was up to.– Innovations.–I just wanted to put a little more weight onto that topic.)

Mikel: Yeah, because you don't want to be copying what they did. Just listen to it, forget about it, and move on. And then write a thousand songs. And if you, I promise you, if you write a thousand songs one of them's gonna be good.

Nils: I learned to play the drums over years and I know what you're talking about. I wasn't talented, but years later people told me, "You're a very talented drummer. You're a great, professional drummer." I'm, eh, I spent hours.

Noah: Yeah, thanks.

Nils: You (Mikel) spent one year in your apartment playing the guitar and writing?

Mikel: Oh, but I'd been writing since I was 15. You know, I've been writing songs my whole life. And a lot of time spent writing, you know, stories and just liking, engaging with like – What I mean to say is that, you know, it's not something that came easily. It was definitely a lot of time was spent. When I first started out I think I got a lot of like, "Way to go buddy." Hey, all right, you know. And then after a while I was in my own mind going, "You know what, I'm just gonna keep doing this. I think I'm onto something here."

Nils: One question, I crossed it out but I'm gonna ask it anyway. You talked some, the world forming around the decisions you set, or something? (Of course I knew about that idea in general. But I wanted to know Mikel's point of view.)

Mikel: Yeah, Emersonian idea. (Note from Nils: Ralph Waldo Emerson, American lecturer, essayist, and poet said: "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."—as to find in similar wordings by Napoleon Hill, Rhonda Byrne, Charles F. Haanel and several others.)

Like, the world, the uni-, it's a Transcendentalist idea. Universe conspires. Once you make a decision to do something the universe kinda gets on your side about it. But only if you're serious. It also tests you and asks you if you're serious. You know, I was flat broke and ruined my credit and living in a tiny little squalor of an apartment and, like, you know, defaulted on every one of my credit cards and was halfway to homeless. And at each one of those things like, life is like, "Do you mean it? Do you mean it? Do you really want to do this?" And if your answer is not, anything other than 100% yes, you just, you don't have a stomach for it, so you like, go to fucking law school or something. You know? Go ...

Noah: [laughs] Yeah, law school is the cop out.

Nils: Did you go to law school? (Note from Nils: Sorry for that, guys. It was very loud at the „White Trash“. As I'm not a native speaker I didn't get him right. Later on the recording I understood exactly what he said.)

Mikel: No, I'm saying, if you want a path that's laid out for you 'cause you can't hack, like, being, you can't stomach the shame of being broke or having to borrow money from friends...

Noah: You shouldn't be a musician.

Mikel: ... or whatever you got to do to get by, don't be a musician.

Nils: You changed your career slightly. You were a writer for magazines. How did you find out that your stomach was more, like, for music.

Mikel: I don't know what happened, to be honest. I don't know. I just did. I'm not sure.

Nils: So it happened subconsciously.

Mikel: Yeah, it just kinda, one day I started doing it and then I just kept doing it, and then I didn't want to do anything else and I didn't care. It helped that I met these guys.

Nils: Yeah, sure. You've got two or three studied musicians in your band?

Mikel: Well, actually all four of them.

Nils: All four?

Mikel: If you want to get into the details.

Nils: All right, so Steven too.

Mikel: Yeah. And like, you know, when you're working with people that are that talented, it does push you a lot. They're very, I mean, they're literally like the most talented people I could find. You're not gonna find a better musician than this guy right here.

Noah: Well, thank you.

Mikel: It's true. And like, we co-write songs together, and I don't co-write with anyone because I think most people aren't very good at it, and I co-write with him because he's good at it. And, you know, when you got people that are that talented that, like, I see stuff where I'm like, how the hell, I don't even now he does it sometimes. Stuff like that, I'm like, "Shit, man." And it gives me faith to like, spend an extra week working on a song and getting it right and working on whatever my contribution is.

Nils: And then you're coming to the level of your team?

Mikel: Trying to, just whatever it is. Yeah, trying to push my own level.

Noah: Also, he probably wouldn't admit it to anyone, but like, you know, with how many songs we've played together as a band, it's an unknown number of songs that he will do by himself before he even considers taking it to the band, before we even get to that step.

Nils: Oh, all right. So you're choosing the songs you bring to the band.

Noah: So, it's not like ...

Mikel: Oh yeah, sure.

Nils: And most of it you cut out and leave.

Mikel: Eighty percent.

Nils: Yeah, kind of like my questions. I had 100 questions for you...

Mikel: It's just like the questions. [laughter]

Nils: I've studied your band in the last three days.

Mikel: I'm very sorry. [laughter from Noah]

Nils: No, it was a great example, actually. To me, it's kind of classic ... but anyway, because, yeah. Let's not get into my details. Let's get into yours. Many musicians still believe managers and labels could hit a „magic switch“ to turn your band into the next U2 overnight. I'd like to know more about your meeting with Phil Costello of TBD Records. Could you tell us about that?

Noah: I mean, Phil was a great guy. We met him very, very early on, once we got on the radio.

Nils: Yeah, on KROQ and the others ...

Noah: So he, he...

Mikel: TBD is Radiohead's label. He runs Radiohead's label.

Noah: Yeah. And he met us, I mean, he met us because we were, like, once we got on the radio, it's such an anomaly, that we ended up meeting a ton of people and Phil functioned for us like, this sort of, we started to call him The Oracle, because he was this one person who instead of being, like, „you have to do this“ or „you have to do this“ or „it's my way or the highway kid, you'll never make it in this business unless you do what I say“, he was one of the first people that sort of helped us to even try to make sense of the big music business world, whatever that is. Because, you know, we were a, we would play shows and record songs when we could. It wasn't like we were, each had like, a guidebook on like, you know, the Idiot's Guide to Making a Record.

Mikel: Phil had some really straightforward rules for us. He was like, "Look, you're just gonna have to go earn your fans." You know, "Each, every, every single one of them. You've got to go earn them." And we're like, "What do you mean?" He's like, "You gotta look them in the eye and sing a song. You gotta look'em in the eye and play a show. You gotta pour your heart out to'em. You gotta, and you can't take'em for granted. You're gonna have to go back six, seven times to each one of these cities. You want to have a touring base before you even think about considering yourself established in that city and that's for every city in the world you want to play." And so, it was very sobering.

Noah: And he was, yeah, he was one of the first people who would be like, "There is no switch. You don't flip a switch and then there's is like a ..."

Nils: Yeah, it's impossible.

Noah: I mean, who doesn't ...

Mikel: And you control your own destiny and you gotta stick by your own, you gotta rely on your own work. Whatever you do, whether it's augmented by a label or just as your own person, at the end of the day you rely on your own work and if you're doing something where you're relying on the work of others, you're just, you're fucked. You gotta rely, 'cause it's not gonna happen. You gotta rely on your own work.

Nils: Many musicians ...

Noah: Yeah, they're waiting to be discovered.

Nils: You're fucked when you rely on others. It's kind of, you make ...

Mikel: Well, 'cause people are sitting around. It's that same idea of talent. They're sitting around waiting for someone to come in and go, "You're talented, kid. Let me take you somewhere." And it's horse shit. Every band that you've ever seen that's successful that, even as cool as they were once they got big, they were hustling.

Noah: Yeah. Sell your, sell your computer, sell your cat, buy a van, get in that van, take it on the road. Like, there's no ...

Mikel: Like, stay up all night writing songs. Write 100. Write 1,000. Write them in 10 different ways. Listen to new music. Listen to old music. And like, really dig deep. What are you about. What are you thinking about? What are you feeling? How are you going to bring that to life in the mind of the listener? Like, really get into that. And don't just do it

once. One time is not even a toe in the water. Do it, like, endlessly and then, you know, at some point you're gonna do something good, even if just by accident, you'll stumble on something good.

Noah: I mean, you have no choice, once you do, I mean, you know, being, you will figure it out, but you have to do it.

Mikel: Yeah.

Nils: Yeah. Wasn't there a moment in time when „All at Once“ changed in your life? Like, the new album is called?

Mikel: When, uh, no. It was very incremental. I mean, we're probably described as one of the most meteoric bands. We've read that about us, so I was, you know, but it didn't feel meteoric to us. It felt like we played for 100 people, then 200, then 300, then 500, then 1,000, then 2,000 ...

Noah: Then went to a new country and played in front of 20 people ...

Mikel: And then it just...yeah.

Nils: How did you do that? How do you promote gigs in cities where you never played?

Mikel: You know, you just look around at that city and see, like, who's going to shows and who's writing about them and, you know, what other bands are playing. Go meet those people and go meet those bands. 'Hey, we're playing a show. Come check it out.' Or like, 'Here's a song we recorded. Hope you like it.' It's not rocket science.

Noah: Yeah, it's hard to say, 'Oh, pick the rock club and go play that,' because maybe the best idea is you should go play the hip-hop club. [crosstalk]

Mikel: Yeah. If your song sucks, it's not going to matter what you do. And if your song's good, eventually it's not going to matter what you either.

Noah: True that.

Nils: What's your opinion on connecting via the Internet and making promotions selling music via the Internet ...

Mikel: I don't know.

Nils: (compared to doing the same) in reality, in real life?

Mikel: I don't know, you know. If you're a musician, you don't have to be, like, some weird technical sales guy. Just make a rock song.

Noah: Yeah, and it's not like the Internet is going to make music better or kill music.

Mikel: It's just like a thing.

Noah: It's just that music has been music.

Mikel: What did Jazz do for the telephone?

Noah: Yeah, what did jazz do for the—yeah, what'd the telephone do for Jazz? The invention of the telephone, what did that do for Jazz music?

Mikel: I mean, it's just like a fucking medium.

Noah: What did the phonograph do for classical music, you know?

Mikel: At the end of the day, you've got to connect something in here to something in there in someone else, and that's it.

Noah: Yeah, it's almost like worrying about what's going to happen in 2035, like, post-Internet. Like, holy shit, we've got to be ready for -- [crosstalk] you've got to be ready for the post Internet era.

Mikel: -- all these weird, like, mobile phone platforms and shit.

Nils: What about the financial respect? Do you think one can make money on the Internet with music?

Mikel: No.

Noah: Well, I mean, you shouldn't be a musician just to make money. You should be a musician 'cause you can't do anything else.

Mikel: If you want to make money, you should go be an investment banker. They make a lot of money and they do it very efficiently. You know, or go be, like, a, like I said, go to law school.

Noah: Yeah, do anything but you do music because you have to. If the band does whatever it's gonna do, Mikel's gonna write ten thousand more songs between now and until he dies. Like, that's going to happen regardless of what else happens.

Mikel: That's really true. That's kind of shocking to think about, but that's true.

Noah: But the fact that we're lucky enough to play it around, the fact that the five of us are lucky enough to know each other, be able to play it, you know, in front of anybody, even if it's that like hundred people, is awesome. But, if you're doing it for the money and the fame and the fortune, then you're out of fucking mind, and you've been lied to your whole life.

Nils: That's what most real big rock stars tell you when you ask them seriously. Even ...

Noah: I'm sure big rock stars are the first people to say that.

Mikel: Well, you know, if you meet people -- like, I've spent some time with Robert Smith, Lou Reed, David Bowie and they're, like, way more humble than whatever the flavor of the month band is.

Noah: Yeah.

Mikel: People who are like the flavor the month band that are one record in and on the cover of NME and everyone's like, 'Ooh!' Like, they have the biggest egos because they don't know what -- arrogance is just insecurity, you know. Because they don't know what the fuck they're doing. They're just like, 'I don't know how I got here, so I guess I should act like this.' You know, the guys that have been around and made a lot of records and played music a long time, they know it's a lot of work. And they know they control their own destiny because they did it. Because they know, 'Hey, I really hit it on this. And because I did, I started to have a career. And then I really hit this other thing, and then I kept having a career, and I just kept touring and I kept going about it.' You know?

Noah: Yeah. In Keith Richards' book, he talks about one of the big moments for the Rolling Stones as a band was when they had an amp. One amp. It was a huge, you know, with everything that they've done in their whole history, still in his mind -- 'cause, you know, they started from the bottom.

Nils: That's an important step in the fifties, sixties, whenever they started. (Note from Nils: Oh, I was so confused. Already had the next question on my mind. The Rolling Stones were founded in 1962, of course!)

Noah: Yeah, and they had an amp that they would plug all the guitars and stuff into.

Nils: I've got two more questions. What do you think about that and how exactly did it happen that your hit song „Sometime Around Midnight“ got played on several stations, for example on KROQ, before the band had a manager or a record deal.

Mikel: Uh, that was a double edged sword, you know? Like, if you, like -- and we knew it at the time because people -- like, not that much cool music gets played on the radio. You know? Most good music you find on a blog or you find through some friends or you find by chasing other bands that you like. So, the fact that we got put on the radio before that happened -- we were what was called a blog band, you know what I mean, or whatever -- and then, same people, same song, same whatever, it just started getting play on the radio and I think people -- like, there's a certain stink to the radio where you're like, 'Oh, god, I hate the fucking radio.' Who likes the fucking radio? You know what I mean? And so then, you know, we've had to work really hard to differentiate ourselves from those bands and a lot of it's been touring a ton and some of it's playing your song. We did these things with these videos where we just play the song with no cuts, no edits, no autotune, no shit, just stand there and play your song. (Note from Nils: You might want to check YouTube or a similar platform for „The Airborne Toxic Event acoustic series“. Great videos.) I think doing things like that is a way to sort of keep that fresh. I mean, bands that are just on the radio are like the lamest bands you can think of.

Nils: Most of them are, yes.

Mikel: Yeah, so, I mean, I don't know dude. It was a double edged sword. I mean, it was cool, but I think we would have been fine without it.

Nils: Yeah. I see that, but by the radio you got a lot of contacts, and such and stuff and so the next --

Mikel: Yeah, but we also lost a lot. (Note from Nils: By the way, well done by the band! Also see the Bandologie book for more information on that. In the chapter on target group marketing there's an extended explanation on why and how to sort out parts of your

audience that don't exactly fit your target group. The problem described by Mikel, even though very short, is a challenge every band had to face, that grew beyond a certain scene and enthused masses later on.)

Nils: You would have got them, anyway.

Mikel: Well, we also lost a lot of contacts. I mean, I think --

Nils: The whole blogger scene

Mikel: Week to week, you could, like, see a difference in the audience and you could see the difference in perception. We've had to fight really hard to be, like, 'Dude, we're not fucking Linkin P...' [laughs]

Noah: Yeah, we're not a flavor of the month, manufactured pop band.

Mikel: Because, like, we're not some stupid fucking, like, manufactured, like, rock and roll band that, you know, that everything's just like, 'Hire this producer. Do this pop mix on the vocal. Compress the guitar. Make the drums sound like this.' You know, all that crap where we're like, 'No, dude, we literally just wrote songs, and then we went into a studio and recorded them, and then we took them on the road to play them.' And it's just the five of us doing all that stuff.

Noah: I think what happens to people a lot is they look at, like, a guy who wrote a song who used to be a writer, and it's an amazing song, and people get frustrated that, like, how can it -- how can this song be on the radio? It's just some dude who wrote a song and he's got these guys and they recorded it in a house. And I think people -- I think it honestly frustrates people because it's a great song and I think that --

Mikel: I don't even think it's -- I think it's simpler than that. I think, you know, we've -- I think that -- just, the people -- you don't listen to cool music on the radio. You just don't. You know, like, very, very rarely does anything ... you know, I think it's just literally that simple. And so, you know, we got very heavily embraced by critics on this record. And then, it's sort of like people -- and we got a lot of -- and that helped us a lot because otherwise I think we'd kind of got lost in the shuffle. You know, music has a lot of projection in it, and if you don't know one from another and you just see, like, a list of bands -- if you see some of the terrible bands our name is listed next to, it's like, 'Whoa, who are these people?'

Noah: Yeah.

Mikel: ... You know? So, like I said, we've worked really hard to distinguish ourselves from that and to stay true to our roots song writing-wise and also, you know, by sort of the way we approach things which is like, 'Dude, if your career is based on radio in 2011, you're, like, on a sinking ship.' (Note from Nils: Again, Mikel just noted this topic very shortly, but for me the band's demand for something new gets very clear. In my opinion the band's demand for something unique—or as in Bandologie: innovations—shows several times during the whole interview.)

Noah: Not gonna happen. And it's all thanks to the Internet.

Nils: Yeah. My last question: what are your experiences with the music industry? Let's say in three phases, phase one, you worked on your own and you got on the radio without a label, without a manager. Phase two, you worked with major ... [crosstalk]

Mikel: Well, I'd throw -- we were on a lot of blogs before we were ever on the radio. We were embraced by, I mean, literally, like, hundreds of blogs, I mean, before we ever, we sent some mp3's out and we had a couple hundred people at our first show and we were playing for, like, five hundred people in L.A. two or three months in. And so it was, like, the radio thing happened, like, we were already touring, we were already playing really big shows in L.A. We weren't just a band playing for twenty people. You know, we had -- there was a lot of stuff going on. All our fans already knew every word to every song. It was like already a thing before, which is like a thing to go to an Airborne show. I mean, we felt lucky at the time, too, and this was all before the radio. It's not like we were put on the radio and then suddenly everything changed for us. Everything changed for us on our first show.

Nils: Great you pointed out how it really went.

Mikel: Well, that is how it went.

Noah: Yeah.

Nils: Alright. That's some kind of picture that bands rarely get, because they always hope for the radio, for managers, for labels, for the one shot, the one magic thing that happens ...

Noah: Yeah. That never happens.

Mikel: It never happens.

Noah: It never, ever --

Nils: The one person you will meet ...

Mikel: It's still not happening. I mean, we're on the largest label in the world (Note from Nils: Universal / Island) and we're still, on a daily basis, like, I'm calling up product managers and calling up our manager and we're talking through a plan, and making sure it's happening, and making that they're focused on the things that we're focused on.

Nils: You do so? You call the guys and you would make sure it's all ... (Of course I could imagine he did that personally. I just asked to really point that out for every musician who watches, reads or listens to this interview.)

Mikel: Oh, yeah. And you know who else did that? Mick Jagger, Prince, Bruce Springsteen, David Bowie, you know, these -- at the end of the day, it's your career. It's your business.

Noah: And you're the only person who's going to make it happen. You can't expect anybody else to do that.

Mikel: And also, they don't know what's in your mind. And you're the one who's got the relationship with the listener. You know, Noah's got the relationship with the listener, not

the product manager at Island Def Jam. I mean, he's a good guy. I don't mind our product manager, I'm just saying --

Noah: [laughter]

Mikel: No, he is. I don't want him to feel called out if he hears this because he's great. He's actually a big believer, but like --

Noah: But I've actually been to 100% of Airborne Toxic Event shows. I've been to every single one of them.

Mikel: So, he has the relationship. They're watching his body language, the way that he plays, the way that he commits to the song and they're listening to a lot of music that he wrote. You know, when you're watching me sing a song, there's a contract that goes on between the singer or a musician and the listener ...

Nils: ... and the audience, yes.

Mikel: ... that has nothing to do with any of this other horseshit. And that contract is the important thing. So, of course, you can't just put that contract in the hands of people who don't know it. They weren't there. [crosstalk] They weren't there. They don't know that exchange. They weren't there.

Noah: And the kids who we meet, they show up and they're like, 'Your lyrics are exactly what, you know, that's what was happening to me.' They'll come up to Mikel and ... 'Those lyrics, I've had that exact same night.' They don't come up to you and they're like, 'Your viral marketing campaign really spoke to me and it's amazing in a deep way.' But, like, no -- I don't think -- have you heard that? [laughter]

Mikel: I've never heard that.

Noah: I thought there might be one kid out there who's, 'Yoo, that was clever ...' But, like, time after time, hundreds of people, 'Oh, that speaks to me. That speaks to me. What you are saying speaks to me.' That's the name of the game.

Nils: What's your experience with a major company? It's always, it's sometimes a concern, majors are bad. Last question.

Mikel: No. No, no. Our label believes in us. They've shown that. You know, and there probably are evils in the music industry that other people have had experiences with that I would look at and say, 'Yeah, that's pretty evil, too.' But our label, we've been blessed, I guess. People really are believers. And almost everyone's a believer. And I think things can go wrong -- but most people are in it because at some point they worked at a record store, they were at their college radio station or they were in a band.

Nils: They were in a band. Like me -- I worked for a major company in Germany.

Mikel: Yeah. So, you know, and that's generally why people are in it and they're believers. And so, for us, we want to tap into that same belief. Our band is sort of founded on some pretty idealistic things and I think they really respond to that and they like it. They want -- there's, like, a long list of bands, and we're the one they want. And we know it. And they tell us this all the time. They're like, 'We believe in you and you're the one we want to

break. We want the world to be a place that embraces you.' And so, you know, we made a record, they said cool. Their input was, 'Nice record.' Or actually it was, 'Great record. We love it. We can't wait to share it with the world.'

Noah: Yeah.

Mikel: I mean, again, maybe it would be different if we were a different band or something, but our experience thus far has not been terrible. And I wish I had a horror story to tell, I just don't. And we had some bad experiences being self released and we had some bad experiences on indie, so, you know, no matter what you do there's going to be challenges and you just have to address them.

Nils: Noah, Mikel, thank you so much.

Mikel: Thank you, Nils.

Noah: Thank you.

Nils: It was great with you. Got some German chocolate for you and --

Noah: Oh, wow.

Nils: -- and a plectrum (guitar pick) from Bandologie ... the book.

Mikel: Did you just give us chocolate? That's the least rock and roll gift I've ever gotten.

Nils: Yeah, I know. I'm very sorry.

Noah: But it has a guitar pick on it. Anna will be really happy.

Mikel: Anna will be very happy.

Nils: Noah ...

Noah: Nice to meet you, brother.

Mikel: Thank you very much.

Nils: Thank you. Have a good show.

Noah: Thanks, guys. (Note from Nils: He meant the camerawoman and myself)

Mikel: Are you going to sneak around for the show?

Nils: Yeah, sure. We're going to see it.

Thanks to The Airborne Toxic Event

Mikel Jollett	Vocals, Guitar
Noah Harmon	Bass
Anna Bulbrook	Violin, keyboards
Steven Chen	Guitar, piano
Daren Taylor	Drums
Pete Galli	Management
Jake Mc Laughlin	Tour manager
Jens Ullrich	Product manager
Oliver Bergmann	Press promotion
... and thanks to the ‚Discovery woman‘.	

More information for musicians on www.bandologie.com