



Arts & Entertainment

The Revival of Elliott Skinner

After a decade of being in the national spotlight through viral covers of popular songs, the Booker T. alum is now emerging in his music as his true self.

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Courtesy of Nazanin Fatemain



Elliott Skinner is undergoing a metamorphosis.

The Booker T. Washington alum and YoungArts Voice winner has spent the last decade performing alongside nationally known musicians. He was a member of Thirdstory, a contemporary vocalist trio that garnered million of views on YouTube for their covers of Billboard hits. The group, which included friends Ben Lusher and Richard Saunders, was Skinner’s musical home for five years. When they separated, Skinner found himself in a state of transition.

“I was and still am in an area of trying to figure out how to put music out by myself, making the music and getting people to hear it,” Skinner recalled. “It was a really a process of starting over.”

Skinner characterized the rebuilding process as an opportunity to build intimate relationships with people who value him, outside of his identity as a musician. Growing up, he longed to be in community with like-minded artistic people. “Outskirts of the norm,” is how he describes it. In Brooklyn, he found a group of people who see and understand him without judgment.

At times, he says he feels lonely in New York, but it’s also where he feels most comfortable. He’s in the process of building his first studio space in Queens, a musical hub for his current ventures into musical arrangement and producing. After years of performing, he is finally in a place to create the music he’s always dreamed of.

Skinner recorded “What Does It Mean” for *Truth To Power*, a compilation album that features a number of prominent local musicians like Leon Bridges, Keite Young, and Abraham Alexander on the [“Soundtrack for Empowerment.”](#) He sings the melody lead on “Restoration,” a jazz song by Max Gerl, his former roommate who connected him to the social justice-focused musical project. The album is scheduled to release on July 31, proceeds of which will benefit four local nonprofits.

In Thirdstory, Skinner and the other band members felt pressured to conform and produce commercially friendly pop music instead of a combination of the trio’s vast musical influences. Due to the virality of their YouTube covers, each musician’s individual talent was stifled. “It’s weird how that cycle works. Where what you put out as an artist, if it’s of a certain lens, you can then be known for that and expected to do that,” he says. Now, he feels empowered to make music that feels like a full, authentic actualization of self.

“Coming out of that [Thirdstory], it definitely has been more of a struggle to be proud of the work we made together, but also being able to define my work outside of that. Which is something I’ve been building toward since I was a kid,” said Skinner.

In the fourth grade, he began to write songs and perform shows at local venues. He spent his childhood singing in church choirs and playing guitar. But Skinner was always destined to make music in his own way; it just took a while to get there. “When Will We Know” is Skinner’s first representation of the artist he is, he says.

Skinner wrote the song during a moment of solitude in his Brooklyn apartment. On first listen, the music sounds tranquil and serene. Skinner’s vocals and guitar create an ethereal energy that allows the listener to unwind. But the song’s tranquility is a way to construct a non-judgmental environment for the listener to contemplate their own fallacies. His music provides a foundation for an internal psychoanalysis to occur.

In the second verse of “When Will We Know,” Skinner creates a moment of introspection for listeners to reflect on. “We live inside our own dream / We analyze our own themes / We look inside our own means,” he sings. It’s reminiscent of shadow work, a psychological and spiritual principle of confronting one’s “dark side,” the wounded areas of ourselves that shape our consciousness. As Skinner undergoes his own transformation, his music invites the listener to initiate one of their own.

Over the next year, Skinner promises to release songs like “When Will We Know” that better represents his musical references and inspiration. He describes his music as a marriage of folk and soul. “Folk as in Black people in fields way. We’re on porches. We’re going from blues to churches. From spirituals to blues to rock, folk is the rural under layer of Black culture and Black music,” he says.

His reclamation of music provided an opportunity for him to understand himself, his family, and the historic relationship Black Texans have with folk music, a genre created out of a deep relationship to nature and the fields. Skinner’s evolution is not only of musical identity and personal growth, but one that redefines his identity to the genre of music itself.

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