

**BILLBOARD.COM** (8/12)

<https://www.billboard.com/music/rock/jonny-hawkins-explains-how-spirits-explores-peoples-shadow-side-1235125496/>

## **Jonny Hawkins Explains How Nothing More's 'Spirits' Explores People's 'Shadow Side'**

The band's Oct. 14 album probes the 'beast side' of man that can be channeled into 'a protector rather than a tyrant'

By [Christa Titus](#)

08/12/2022



Nothing More - Jody Domingue

Jonny Hawkins, the 35-year-old vocalist-percussionist of hard-rock band [Nothing More](#), has been on the road since graduating high school. Despite being a touring veteran, he was caught off-guard when he visited artist-producer Sahaj Ticotin in Fort Wayne, Ind., to work on vocals for Nothing More's *Spirits* album (Better Noise Music, Oct. 14). The economical Airbnb Hawkins had booked was even more bare bones than its picture had illustrated.

"I swear, this Airbnb was like a honey pot for some serial killer," he recalls. "It felt very soulless. And the description on the advertisement was 'Out-of-towners only.'" For security, Hawkins stashed the biggest knife he could find in the kitchen under his mattress. "And sure enough, I forget. I left the knife there. My Airbnb review from this guy is, 'I don't know why, but this guy had a knife between the mattress and the box spring.'"

He chuckles about the experience, but during his conversation with *Billboard*, Hawkins mentions something that's no laughing matter: that he encountered a few situations during the past few years where both his life and reputation were truly in peril. He declined to elaborate on the details, although he notes that "Valhalla," the rousing closer on *Spirits*, is about the resulting maturity that he gained from the event. It features a telling lyric: "Some people's minds aren't worth changing/ Some people's games just aren't worth playing."

“I guess when you’re in true danger where your life is on the line, you really see certain parts of you come to the surface that you didn’t even know were there,” he says, noting that people forget how much their ancestors endured to survive as a species. “Deep down, though, we still have some grit. We’ve got some strength we don’t even realize, so it was kind of cool to see that, even though it was some s–tty things I went through.”

Other *Spirits* tracks have what he calls “a lot of shadow side,” like the snarling, Korn-ish “Face It.” “Certain situations bring that side out, and you go, ‘Oh, holy shit. There’s a beast side that’s there.’ At first, you’re concerned by it because most people’s reaction to seeing themselves in that light is, ‘Oh, am I a bad person?’ When in reality, it’s all about integrating that part of you and it being a protector rather than a tyrant.”

Fans can learn which “spirit type” dominates their personality with [the Spirits test](#) that the band introduced on July 20. Hawkins developed the 25-question psychometric exam by incorporating data gleaned from sources that range from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to the zodiac. Another supplement to the album is the *Spirits Vol. 1* graphic novel that Z2 Comics will publish in multiple editions in spring 2023. Written by Dan Watters and illustrated by Christian Rosado, the book follows four characters over 70 years and “examines how the unexpected manifestation of their spirit selves alter and shape their destinies for a greater purpose,” according to Z2 Comics’ website.

Nothing More made its mainstream breakthrough in 2014 with the No. 2 Mainstream Rock Airplay hit “Ballast (This Is the Time).” The blood-pumping clarion call for enlightenment launched the group’s self-titled debut on Better Noise Music (then known as Eleven Seven). The album gathered more airplay success with tracks about materialism (“Mr. MTV,” No. 12), a loved one’s mental health and addiction struggles (“Jenny,” No. 6) and a thank-you to tough times (“Here’s to the Heartache,” No. 4).

On 2017 follow-up *The Stories We Tell Ourselves*, the band ripped into America’s fractious state with “Let ‘Em Burn” (No. 2) and [its first chart-topper, “Go to War,”](#) and urged listeners to look within to achieve global change on “Do You Really Want It?” (No. 6). Hearts were also laid bare in the breakup ballad “Just Say When” (No. 8) and “Fade In/Fade Out,” an epic tribute to family legacy. Nothing More earned three well-deserved Grammy nominations with *Stories*: for best rock album, as well as best rock performance and best rock song for “Go to War.”

According to Luminate, the group has logged 571 million on-demand official streams and 599,000 digital song sales in the United States. It has another hit with “Tired of Winning”: The first *Spirits* track to be promoted to radio is No. 5 on the Aug. 13 Mainstream Rock Airplay chart. Building on that momentum, an extended version that was paired with the song “Ships in the Night” was released on July 31. The song will also be featured on the soundtrack to the horror movie *The Retaliators* (Better Noise Films, Sept. 14), which arrives on Sep. 16 and features such labelmates as Mötley Crüe, Papa Roach and Bad Wolves. Meanwhile, *Spirits*’ second official single, [“You Don’t Know What Love Means,”](#) is being released today.

Hawkins calls “Tired of Winning” a playful take on the inclination for self-sabotage. He chalks that up to the tendency to never enjoy the fruits of “thousands of years of human progress and toil and struggle and sacrifice because we constantly move the goal post and go, ‘Well, I’m still not happy because the person next to me has this better car,’ or ‘Why does this person have more success?’ ... We’re just chasing our tails forever. This song is laughing at the insanity of the human condition in that sense.”

“Tired of Winning” features a jagged, intense breakdown and spoken word by late English writer-philosopher Alan Watts, whose ruminations also graced songs on *Stories* and *Nothing More*. Hawkins explains Watts’ appeal to the band: “He uses words in a way that has a different key, and we felt that it brings your consciousness or your conscious state to a more aligned place with reality and there’s something peaceful and releasing about that place.”

Nothing More had just begun working on *Spirits* when the 2020 pandemic broke out. For a band that tours nonstop, Hawkins calls the unexpected break “kind of a welcome relief.” It was the first time in years that he, guitarist Mark Vollelunga and bassist Dan Oliver had experienced a normal life that, at first, was somewhat exciting. (Drummer Ben Anderson joined in 2015, replacing Paul O’Brien.) “And then, slowly but surely, the reality of how much more fun it is to be on tour came back,” he says with a laugh.

While touring, he feels “spoiled” in the sense that he’s “plugged into a system where there’s all these moving parts, and all these people each have these different jobs, and it’s kind of a moving ship and you’re a part of it.” The quartet made up for lost time when it did a three-month U.S. tour earlier this year and will start a similar stretch on Aug. 26 with a multi-act lineup that includes In This Moment. But when he had lost that routine, Hawkins struggled to remain motivated — he was used to focusing on things he needed to accomplish in a short amount of time before leaving home again — and both the pandemic and the album felt like they dragged on forever.

“There isn’t that synergistic refeeding of the fan base by going out on the road and that feeds back into the social media, so it felt like we were making an album in a vacuum,” he recalls. “And after a while, you get to a point where you start feeling like, ‘Does this even matter? Does anybody even care?’ ”

The biggest challenge to creating *Spirits* was piecing it together remotely. Hawkins was in Louisiana, Oliver and Vollelunga were in Texas, and Anderson was in Arizona. Although artists have long collaborated that way, it was new territory for Nothing More to record a whole record in that manner, and it took almost a year longer than it usually would have to finish it. (The foursome self-produced the album, along with Ticotin and manager Will Hoffman.) “I don’t think we’ll make one that way again,” Hawkins declares with a laugh. “It was extremely frustrating, and it’s just not nearly as efficient as being in the same room with people. But I’m thankful for what we learned from it because it’s a very good supplemental skill to have because we can keep songs and albums progressing when there’s those times when we physically can’t be together.”

The pandemic also influenced the *Spirits* single [“Turn It Up Like \(Stand in the Fire\),”](#) whose chaotic introduction and soaring vocals recall “Ballast.” Released in March, it focuses on how the internet influenced the collective psyche during the earlier months of the pandemic. Hawkins calls the social and political climate at the time “more heightened than usual — which, to me, wasn’t just about what was actually happening. It was the fact that everyone was on their phone at the same time and had nothing else to do other than get hopped up about issues or angry at each other on social media.” (To promote the song, the band launched the “Fuck the Internet” campaign that included a T-shirt bearing the logo.)

However, when artists offer views about social problems, Hawkins thinks they run the risk of sounding arrogant. “It almost feels like they have a lofty opinion of their own opinion and the weight of it because they have a platform — when in reality, in my experience, artists many times are pretty off base.”

What does Nothing More think of such matters? “We love to debate and argue and talk ideas through deeply, but we don’t all agree on everything. So I can never speak for us as like one unified statement when it comes to actual issues,” he says. “But the heart of things, we’re pretty close ... as a band, we don’t want to be, ‘Oh, they’re conservative,” or ‘Oh, they’re liberal.’ We almost want people to not really know which side we’re on about too many things.” Nothing More instead operates from the perspective of offering “questions rather than our answers, because all of our answers are a little different,” Hawkins explains. “That was the approach of gurus or wise men of the past, was that when they were questioned by leaders of their time, they would always answer in a very clever question. I find that approach fascinating.”