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## POP'S NEXT SECRET WEAPON

**TAME IMPALA'S**  
KEVIN PARKER  
ON HIS LONG,  
STRANGE TRIP  
FROM PSYCH-ROCK  
HEADLINER TO  
GO-TO HITMAKER



### WHAT HAPPENED IN VEGAS

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\$60 MILLION DEAL  
ENDED IN KAOS

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TO RUN THE  
GRAMMYS NOW?

IMPALA



# LEARNING TO FLY

TAME IMPALA'S **KEVIN PARKER** USED TO PREFER SOLITUDE. BUT WITH A LONG-AWAITED ALBUM, ARENA SHOWS AND EVER MORE STAR COLLABORATIONS ON THE WAY, HE'S OWNING UP TO WHAT HE REALLY WANTS: A PLACE AT THE CENTER OF POP MUSIC

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DJENEBA ADUAYOM



Parker photographed  
Jan. 7 in Los Angeles.



GROOMING BY TONY WATKINS/ARTISTS MANAGEMENT

# T

**NOTHING SIGNIFIES THE ROCK STAR** lifestyle quite like an enormous house with nothing in it. It has been months since Kevin Parker, who records as the psych-rock project Tame Impala, bought this Spanish-style villa with a home recording studio in the Hollywood Hills, where the iconic sign looms over his driveway. But he hasn't had much time to furnish it. Headlining Coachella, slaving over a long-awaited new album and selling out arenas around the world — including two nights at New York's Madison Square Garden in August — kind of got in the way.

Late-afternoon sunlight beams through the bare windows onto the hardwood floors, where blue masking tape outlines where furniture will go, though a single, rogue bean bag chair seems to scoff at any such ambitions. "Sorry for the mess," Parker, 34, mumbles politely, traipsing through the master bedroom, which is decorated with only a mattress and a splayed-open suitcase strewn with T-shirts. He settles on the sprawling balcony — from which he thinks he has glimpsed Brad Pitt taking walks on the hill below — to watch the sunset, a half-finished bottle of Corona in hand. There's a bedsheet mangled on the outdoor sofa, as if someone recently slept under the stars. "It has taken us a while to get around to furniture," says Parker. (He married Sophie Lawrence, a marketing strategist and ice cream company director, last February.) He chooses a seat at a metal table. "This table is one of the first things we bought."

One thing here is recognizable: a gaping window in the living room, which looks just like the one pictured on the cover of *The Slow Rush*, Tame Impala's fourth studio album, out — at last — Feb. 14 on Interscope. It's Parker's first album in five years, and the culmination of his slow progression toward mainstream, cross-genre recognition. First came the crunchy garage-rock of his 2010 debut, *Innerspeaker*, then 2012's *Lonerism*, with the stomping hit "Elephant" omnipresent thanks to a BlackBerry commercial synch. In 2015, Parker put out his masterpiece: *Currents*, a richly textured, pop-leaning rumination on personal evolution that reached No. 4 on the Billboard 200, spawned twangy streaming hit "The Less I Know the Better" (still his most popular song on Spotify) and earned a Grammy nomination for best alternative music album.

In the years since, Tame Impala has become a music industry anomaly: a rock act that can sell out arenas and rake in 1.6 billion total on-demand streams, according to Nielsen Music/MRC Data — all without releasing a new project in a half-decade. Yet if Parker appears to live

like a rock star, he has never quite considered himself one. Shy, introspective and prone to perfectionism, he writes, records, performs, produces and mixes all Tame Impala material on his own, often holed up in his other home studio just outside of Perth, Australia, one of the most remote cities in the world. His music both feeds off of and reflects isolation — "There's a party in my head and no one is invited" goes the aptly titled "Solitude Is Bliss" — though his writing often sums up the universal anxieties of life and love in the digital age better than most confessional pop stars.

Yet just as Parker appeared to reach his prime with *Currents*, he decided he needed a break from, well, himself. "When it's me carrying the torch, there's no passing of the torch," he says. (Contrary to even many fans' belief, Tame Impala is only Parker, not a band, though he performs live with a group of childhood friends.) "It's me the whole way." For the next five years, Parker dove into expanding his creative circle. Thanks to *Currents*, he had morphed from indie stoner hero to critically revered writer-producer. Suddenly his manager, Spinning Top management company and label founder/CEO Jodie Regan, was fielding calls from artists wanting to link up.

**THE TEAM**

**MANAGEMENT**

**SPINNING TOP**  
Jodie Regan, founder/CEO

**LABELS**

**INTERSCOPE RECORDS**  
John Janick, chairman/CEO,  
Interscope Geffen A&M

**UNIVERSAL MUSIC AUSTRALIA**  
Glen Goetze, A&R manager

**AGENT**

**CREATIVE ARTISTS AGENCY**  
Kevin French

Travis Scott, a Tame Impala fan and fellow crunchy-guitar enthusiast, enlisted Parker to co-write and produce "Skeletons" on his chart-topping 2018 album, *Astroworld*. The same year, Parker walked away from a studio session with Kanye West with a co-writing credit on *Ye* for "Violent Crimes" and an invaluable lesson: to not be afraid of failure. "That's one of the biggest forces of Kanye as an artist," says Parker.

"Kevin can do anything," says Mark Ronson, who invited Parker to Memphis to weigh in on his 2015 album, *Uptown Special*, and enlisted him as a co-writer on the Camila Cabello-starring "Find U Again" from 2019's *Late Night Feelings*. "He can play anything, and play it incredibly well. He has killer melodic instincts. And he has an impossibly cool aesthetic when it comes to sonics, without ever trying to be cool. It can be intimidating to collaborate with

someone like that, but also his take on things is so unique, I never want to distill that." He's now just one Parker super-fan, a group that includes everyone from ZHU and Theophilus London to Lady Gaga and Rihanna, who covered Tame Impala's "New Person, Same Old Mistakes" on 2016's *ANTI*.

Along the way, Parker found that maybe solitude isn't always bliss, and now he wants to take his biggest chance yet: making the leap from studio whiz to in-demand collaborator at the center of the music world. "I hope to one day be able to do what I do on my own in a room full of people," says Parker. "That's the ultimate goal for me." Working with Cabello and Gaga, he realized a lifelong goal: writing pop songs for pop stars. "It's the yin to the yang of psychedelic rock — writing a catchy, sugary pop song that's like, three minutes long," he explains. "I want to be a Max Martin."

Like most things Tame Impala-related, attaining Swedish mega-producer status will ultimately come down to Parker himself — and whether he can get out of his own head. Listening to *The Slow Rush* this morning, he fought the familiar urge to continue tweaking things, promising himself that the "flaws" he perceives won't bother him in a year's time. "This is all part of me trying to outsmart myself. Outsmart my, um, heart," he says. He giggles, pleased with the accidental rhyme. "Outsmart my heart!"

**P**ARKER'S JOURNEY TO POP MUSIC'S center began at the edge of the Earth. Located on the coast of western Australia, Perth has a population of 2 million spread across roughly 2,500 square miles. (New York's 8 million occupy less than 500.) Parker describes it as a place with Los Angeles' scenery, but a small rural town's mindset: "If you're not on your way to raising a family and putting down a deposit on your home by your late 20s, what are you doing with your life? There's a little bit of that vibe."

He found his tribe in the small-but-thriving music scene of Fremantle, a more liberal port city a short drive away. He was playing in several local bands including Pond, Mink Mussel Creek and his personal project, The Dee-Dee Dums (which later became Tame Impala), when he met Regan, who was running a local music venue, in 2006.

"I always thought he seemed more adult than the other guys, and quite like a scientist," says Regan, 48, who, with her fiery red hair and flame tattoos, is as gregarious as Parker is soft-spoken. "He might sit there, quietly listening, but then he really has an opinion." At the time, Regan had little experience as a music manager. But in the bubble of Perth, "we were just so far away that we didn't stick to any rules and didn't think we had to," she says. "There was no chance anyone [from the music industry] was going to be at a show, so everyone could do what they wanted and see what worked and what doesn't."

That changed roughly a year later, when Glen Goetze, then an A&R executive at Universal



Top: Parker (right) DJ'd with friend and collaborator Ronson at the Glastonbury Festival in England in 2016. Bottom: Tame Impala on Saturday Night Live with Scott (left) and John Mayer in 2018.

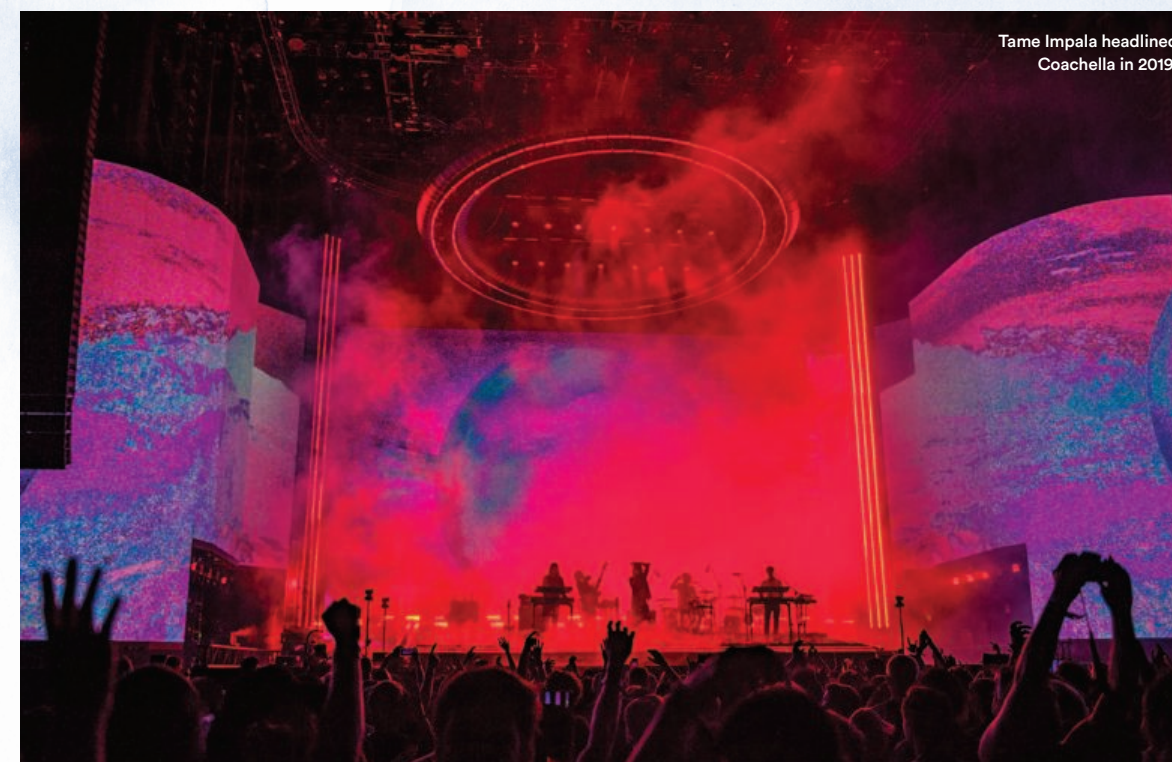
ownership; Pavlovic later resigned and the label dissolved. Regan says that Parker has recovered his missing publishing royalties, though it took three years and “lots of legal fees.” He’s now realigned under Universal with Interscope in the United States (and Universal Music Australia in other territories), where chairman/CEO John Janick’s independent-label origins as founder of Fueled by Ramen impressed him. “Tame Impala has built a body of timeless music that rises above any passing musical trends,” says Janick. “With Tame, [Parker] has created the kind of band that forges its own path.”

At Interscope, Parker is still left largely to do as he pleases — “rare for a major label,” says his agent, Kevin French of Creative Artists Agency. “You sit back and trust that he’s going to keep coming out with something better.” Parker suggests that Interscope’s laissez faire attitude might have something to do with the fact that his album budget is pretty much “zero dollars” by choice, he says, laughing. “Honestly, I can’t really think of what I would spend it on.” Renting studio space? “I don’t like recording anywhere that’s not a home studio.” What about hiring studio personnel? “I would just wait until they leave.”

He’s clearly doing something right: This spring, Tame Impala will start a North American arena tour including venues like Los Angeles’ Forum, San Francisco’s Chase Center and Miami’s American Airlines Arena. (In an odd twist of fate, MGMT will open some shows.) In April, Parker will embark on his biggest tour of Australia and New Zealand yet, before returning stateside to headline Bonnaroo and Governors Ball. This won’t be Parker’s first time playing arenas — he did so easily (and headlined Coachella) in recent years without an album. According to Billboard Boxscore data, Tame Impala grossed \$6.5 million and sold 132,786 tickets across 18 shows in 2019 — a new record for the act.

French, who began working with Tame Impala in 2011, isn’t surprised that Parker has this command of big rooms. He still remembers booking one of the act’s early shows at Brooklyn’s 600-capacity Music Hall of Williamsburg in November 2012, a month after the release of *Lonerism*. It sold out instantly. “They had such a rabid fan base, even back in those days, so every show we did was selling out from step to step,” he says. The following year, Parker filled Manhattan’s 2,800-capacity Terminal 5 and scored a mid-bill slot at Coachella.

“There aren’t many rock bands out there playing arenas,” says French. He thinks *Currents* was the turning point that demonstrated Tame Impala’s live potential since it appealed to both Parker’s home-grown fan base and a broader, mainstream audience. “[Tame Impala] still have their fans from when they were a straight-up rock band, but they’ve evolved into something with much more appeal to the masses,” he continues. “I get offers for electronic music festivals. They’re one of the hottest live acts in the world, and it’s something you can [put] in a dance music festival, or do their own headlining shows.”



Tame Impala headlined Coachella in 2019.

Parker also pulls in fans globally, especially in Latin America. Tame Impala’s top streaming market, just behind Los Angeles, is Mexico City — where Parker will return in March to perform his first-ever stadium show at the Foro Sol Stadium for an audience of 26,000. And as he books larger and larger venues, says French, Parker is “doing a great job of stepping up and being that life-of-the-party guy. And I don’t know if it’s naturally who he is.”

These days, Tame Impala’s live show is a psychedelic spectacle complete with lasers, kaleidoscopic visuals and an enormous, doughnut-shaped, revolving light rig. At his first Madison Square Garden date in August, Parker jumped onstage in a glittery bomber jacket, red Solo cup in hand, and greeted the crowd with a bellowing, “Heyyyy, what’s going on?!” Then he launched into “Let It Happen” — standing squarely at center stage.

**DURING PARKER’S 2019 TOUR,** there was, he says, one obvious “elephant in the room.” The crew would walk past him and say, “‘Oh, how’s that album coming along, Kevin?’” he recalls. “No pressure or anything.”

He meant to release *The Slow Rush* just before headlining Coachella last April (a slot that opened up after Justin Timberlake canceled). But three weeks before the festival, Parker changed his mind. “I [had] told myself that all I wanted to do was put out an album, and I didn’t care if it wasn’t as good. I was happy to sacrifice quality for timing,” he says. “[But] I just knew in my heart that it wasn’t ready.” He pulled it back and, in perhaps a subtle wink at Coachella

fans, played the non-album single “Patience,” which opens with the line, “Has it really been that long?”

Fittingly, the main topic of *The Slow Rush* is time. There are songs about obsessing over the past — Parker calls himself “a chronic nostalgia addict” — and others about anxiety over the future. On the dizzying single “It Might Be Time,” Parker taunts himself about losing his mojo, singing, “You ain’t as cool as you used to be.” On the classic-rock-leaning “Posthumous Forgiveness,” he confronts a complicated relationship with his late father, who died in 2009 of skin cancer. Elsewhere, mortality is a motivator; in one balmy track, he breezily ponders getting a “home in Miami.” Why not?

It might be his most introspective album yet, but it also feels like his most sonically adventurous. After working with such a diverse range of artists, Parker says he felt emboldened to take bigger chances with his sound. “I’ve reached a fork in the road where it’s like, ‘Do I dial it back, or do I fuckin’ ramp it up?’” he says. “And in the past, I may have decided to dial it back.” This time, he fuckin’ ramped it up: In place of the enveloping synths of *Currents*, *The Slow Rush* is full of organic instrumentation — wooden piano keys, pan flutes and, most prominently, a racket of dusty drums. Parker’s own voice, too, is more prominent than ever. “Every album I’ve done, I’ve regretted mixing the vocals so low,” he says. “So I’ve been like, ‘Kevin, just fuckin’ let the people hear your voice!’”

That new confidence extends to his growing interest in shared studio sessions. “I’ve only scratched the surface with [collaborating],” he says. Arctic Monkeys and Dua Lipa have reached out to him,

and Tame Impala die-hards are still waiting for the formal release of a song he worked on with SZA and Ronson in 2017 but never finished. Regan thinks he has even bigger ambitions: “I know he’s got his eyes on Beyoncé.”

In the more immediate future, Parker might be content to enjoy more ordinary pleasures. “I guess just being so consumed with my own music, I [have] shut out other things that would help me grow as a person and as an artist,” he reflects. Things that make him feel like a “normal modern human,” he jokes, like binge-watching Netflix shows. “Things I can talk about with people that aren’t... super-geeky music things.” And maybe, too, things like enjoying success. “If someone compliments me on the album, I’m going to take the compliment,” he says, then pauses. “And like, believe them.”

#### THE SUN HAS SET, THOUGH

Parker doesn’t seem to notice the pitch-black darkness from the balcony, nor the chill. Every so often, a distant howl fills the air, and we wonder

if it’s the sound of a siren or a pack of coyotes. “Coyotes,” Parker decides matter-of-factly. “It means they just killed something.”

We’ve been talking about our struggles with social anxiety, and Parker is reminded of a *Slow Rush* listening party he held for a group of industry insiders, music journalists (including myself) and friends last November. It’s something his 2015 self would have “absolutely dreaded,” he says. “Like, ‘Get me the fuck out of here.’”

Attendees checked their phones at the door of Night Moves, a dimly lit retro bar in Brooklyn owned by LCD Soundsystem frontman James Murphy. Some lingered at the open bar, while others sank into shiny red leather booths. No one disturbed Parker, who swayed in front of the DJ booth the entire time, his head down, hair bobbing.

That night, Parker felt excitement instead of dread. “In the same way that, sometimes, you just eat a clump of wasabi with your sushi,” he says with a wide smile. “Like, fuck it! I want to hear the silence between songs. I want to feel people judging it.” He considers another analogy. “It’s like Batman being Batman because he’s afraid of bats.”

In the end, he felt only slightly uncomfortable. As his music played “apocalyptically loud,” he recalls proudly, Parker kept hearing things he wanted to change, and afterward, he decided to remaster the whole thing. He could only stay at the party through track four before he left to catch a flight back to Australia. But when his team came by to tell him that his Uber had arrived, he didn’t want to leave. **Q**

“IT’S THE YIN TO THE YANG OF PSYCHEDELIC ROCK — WRITING A CATCHY, SUGARY POP SONG. I WANT TO BE A MAX MARTIN.”

—PARKER

Music Australia subsidiary Modular, stumbled upon Tame Impala’s Myspace page. “It was psych-delic, something I was really into — but most of the stuff I was listening to was 30 years old,” recalls Goetze. “He was somebody doing it in the present day. It felt fresh and contemporary.” He flew Parker out to Sydney to discuss a record deal, signed him shortly after and still works as Parker’s A&R representative today. (They co-executive-produced *The Slow Rush* together.)

Even with a major-label deal, Parker’s individualism prevailed. He refused to rerecord the bedroom demos that made up Tame Impala’s self-titled debut EP, so Modular released it as is, just three months after Parker’s signing, in 2008. When Tame Impala opened for fellow psych-rock revivalists MGMT in Sydney that year — at the time considered a big break — Parker refused to play the EP single “Desire Be Desire Go,” opting instead for a “12-minute song,” says Regan, and also insisted on standing to the side of the stage the whole time. “We would fight and fight [with the label], and they’d eventually say, ‘OK, fine!’” says Regan. “We didn’t want to be obvious. Kevin wanted to show more depth and creativity than that.”

Parker is no longer signed to Modular after a series of lawsuits. BMG Rights Management, which handles his publishing, sued the imprint and Universal Music Australia in 2015 for allegedly failing to make quarterly royalty payments. (The case was eventually dismissed.) Separately, Universal Music Australia sued Modular founder Stephen Pavlovic in a dispute over Modular’s