



Photo: Jordan Hemingway

Direct speech

Out of the blue, the great drummer **Gerry Hemingway** makes people sit up and take notice as a singer/songwriter. In the freiStil interview, the American, who has lived in Switzerland for a long time, talks about the motivation and the lyrics for his new record *Afterlife*.

Gerry, you've been in for many years known in the open-minded music world as a brilliant drummer in dozens of important improv ensembles. Suddenly you surprise us all when notable singer/songwriter. How did that happen?

In fact, it was always there. The influence and love of singing is something I have talked about for many years. Look carefully, and you will find the use of my voice on many recordings.

Speaking of which: I hear a certain kinship in your voice with that of the great Arto Lindsay. Would you agree with me?

Well I am not sure – I haven't thought of, or encountered him in a very long time.

What I remember from long ago was a mixture of his Brazilian roots and his unique skronk style of guitar playing.

As I write I am listening to "Illuminated", and a few other things. He seems to have all but disappeared since the early 2000's. Anyways his voice is interesting, softer and higher than mine (he was younger at the time – this might have changed). His background from Brazil is evident in his material and sensibility of songwriting contrasted by his schizophrenic guitar breaks which I quite like. My own background is quite a bit more varied, and very difficult to pin down with this new recording. I am not easily defined stylistically or by genre. About the only term that works is "eclectic". So many elements are at play but I think – and maybe you agree – there is a coherence in the whole program. And partly I think that is because my singing is a unifying factor.

Are there any other parallels between your percussion and your Voice?

As a drummer, much of what I learned about phrasing and timing came from the great singers from all genres. It's true what you say that my central performance work is in improvised music settings (or groups with varying forms of composition). However, my own projects are a separate category. In my own work I have always purposefully created significant challenges for myself. For me it is vital to change, to risk, to explore what is possible. I also have felt strongly that what I wish to express in these times needs the more direct route of lyric. I have done so much work in instrumentalism and abstraction, now I wish to speak directly. I also just love to sing, and as my explanation of this production that is posted explains I went through a really interesting process to arrive at my own songs via my singing the songs of other songwriters.

The title of your first release of your album of songs is "Afterlife".

Well that's not exactly true. I have done a recording of songs before, released in 2002 on Between the Lines, entitled "Songs". I was not the singer (with one exception on "Anton") but I wrote and produced the whole recording.

Ah, I didn't know that. And be Afterlife indicates that after everything we've known about you, you're new invented?

I believe committing yourself to being an artist is a serious responsibility. My way of actualizing that commitment is to be willing to go where I am not comfortable, to expand my possibility as an artist and to give all of myself to create compelling work. Before I could release this recording, I took years searching and exploring this desire. I discovered I can sing and that my voice is a strong and valid vehicle for my expression. To me singing these songs is an authentic representation of what I feel in this time of my life, and this time in this world.

About the title of this new CD I made this statement on my website: "It's title "Afterlife" traditionally conveys a promise to the living that our travails upon the earth are rewarded on the 'other side'. However, I rather think of it as a myth we've authored to remind us that we are living this life now."

I prefer to leave the definition of this title up to one's imagination. In other words, I prefer ambiguity and the poetic engagement of the experiencer (listener) of this recording.

The lyrics – and the photos of you as well – can be interpreted as direct statements, as naked in a certain way. Is this the new picture we should get of you, a new picture looking in the mirror?

Yes, I choose vulnerability and honesty in my form of expression, as I always have as a drummer. But this record is not about me. My lyric might appear in some cases to be personal, but my intention is to create songs that are for all of us. I believe the content of this project can be related to as a shared experience. Take "Missing You" which could be taken as a personal kind of love song, but it is more deeply about loss. It could be the loss of anyone who one cared deeply about, such as the death of a mother or father. Or it could be about losing a lover, a broken heart. In the end it could also be about the process of growth.

Most of the songs are love songs, just for example "Love Me As I Am". Is this a soundtrack or a comment to a so called midlife crisis?

Not at all. First of all there are 4 songs that are in or around the topic of love (Love Me As I Am, Losing Hand, Junkyard Magic and Missing You), the other 5 are on different topics.

"Love Me As I Am" is more about the journey of the soul. So the love, in this case, is not necessarily about romantic love. My musical and poetic context is a boat adrift at sea, a bit towards the mood of the Homer's Odyssey.

The most direct love song is "Junkyard Magic", and this is a story song, and meant to be a moment in the program of this recording to celebrate the joy and wonder of love

But please pay some attention to the other songs content. "I Can't Stay Here Any Longer" is my reflection about forced migration,

about losing one's home and crossing hostile border's in search of freedom. And "The Long March" is about racial privilege and a call to people like myself to deeply deal with the roots of racism via the murder that we all have watched of George Floyd. "Wake Up" speaks about a lot of contemporary social issues including climate. And the other two tunes that begin and end the record are ambiguous, poetic, more from my unconscious and deal with more spiritual matters. We could say the liminal space.

Afterlife is a kind of solo album of you. Still you have you invited a few guests to the realization ...

Yes, it should very well be mentioned who I brought on board for this production and the role improvisation plays in the instrumental aspects of this record. It's a really interesting group of musicians. I am sure you are aware of Manuel Troller (SchnellerTollerMeier - and his solo work) who plays a significant role in the first and last piece, and maybe as well Florestan Berset who is part of MingBauSet, this new trio based here in Luzern.

As well, Michael Moore who turns in an outstanding solo on "Junkyard Magic" with who, as you well know, I share a long history of music making.

Also Sebastian Strinning who solos on "Wake Up" who along with Manuel Troller can be found together with me on the record "Tree Ear" on Clean Feed (an entirely improvised recording).

So there are many ways to look at this recording as it should be when so much time was spent creating it and considering all the possible ingredients.

<https://gerryhemingway.com/afterlife>

freiStil

freistil.klingt.org

Magazin für Musik und Umgebung

#106

März/April 2023

EUR 5,-

Foto: Ash Dye

Macie Stewart

Kulturforum Villach

Elisabeth Schimana

Gerry Hemingway

Donald Byrd

IGNM: Junge Kritik

Serious Series, Berlin

3 Tage Jazz Saalfelden