



Hank Shizzoe

This Place Belongs To The Birds

A conversation about music, wildlife, records, streaming, guitars, journeys, sound and more.

Interview: Montgomery Ward – copyright free use for print and online media

What's with the title?

That comes from the simple fact that the planet we live on is not ours. Birds inhabit a different corner in the evolutionary cycle. They are descendants of dinosaurs. They have been around for a very long time and they are among the dominant species of the planet. They are all over the place. They cover unbelievable distances in all imaginable kinds of conditions. And they can sing, they have rhythm, almost all of them have impeccable style. We are their guests. A lot of us don't treat our hosts very kindly. We should change that.

Here are a few facts: Switzerland, where I live, has a human population of eight million. There are one million blackbirds, 150'000 common swifts, 50'000 common buzzards, one million house sparrows and 300'000 hooded crows... It is believed that there are over 10'000 different species of birds on Earth. Estimates of how many birds live on this planet vary from 200 to 400 billion. So there.

This album sounds like it's steeped in folk tradition.

That is mostly true. All the songs were written on acoustic guitars. Most of my songs are anyway. But for this record it became clear early on that acoustic instruments should remain in the centre of the arrangements along with the voice. That, in turn, points toward folk music. It is a relaxed, lightfooted album. There is no straightforward rock'n'roll, no big amplifiers, no loud drums. You can hear the rooms where this music was recorded. And the lyrics reflect all that, too. These are simple, warm and direct songs.

Was that a deliberate change from "Songsmith"?

There was no concept behind this, it just happened. "Songsmith" was varied, finely arranged, very precise, carefully produced, but also joyful. The new album has different origins. The simplicity comes from the fact that the songs were written in a short pe-

riod of time. It is a kind of cycle, the songs are connected. They are about closeness and distance, about home and the urge to leave, about desire and the longing for simplicity.

Why did you record this album on your own?

I didn't record "This Place Belongs To The Birds" on my own. Simon Baumann, who is the drummer in my band, plays on four songs. He brought his drum kit over to my place and we set up in my living room. We focused on the room sound and recorded him with just two microphones. Baptiste Germser from Paris was travelling through Berne and brought his french horn. He played like a true master. I had been working with Simon and Baptiste on the tours we did with Stephan Eicher. I also called my old friend Michel Poffet, who has played the double bass for more than fifteen years in my live band. Everything else is me playing and singing.

This is your 14th record. What's different?

You learn. You know more about the process. You develop an instinct for what is necessary and what you need – and what to leave out. Making records is a craft. At some point I learned that inspiration requires space, emptiness. That, in turn, creates awareness, sharpens the senses. It was clear to me from the outset that this album should have a certain sound. Bigger rooms, lots of slapback, Elvis Presley style echo on the voice, warm, natural tones, resonance, a sound that you can live in. The songs were showing the way. In my head I could hear all the songs in the same room.

20 years ago it would have been difficult to follow that vision, because there would have been too many choices to make. Nowadays I know pretty clearly where I want to go and how to get there. As I said, making records is a craft. You learn and you get better at it. To me it's as if I have been training 25 years to do this.

Would you like to be a bird?

No.

There are three cover versions on the album.

What about them?

One is "I Wanna Be Loved By You", a song from the 1920s, later made famous by Marilyn Monroe in Billy Wilder's "Some Like It Hot". A year ago I was a guest in a radio show, along with british singer songwriter Gus McGregor. The theme of the broadcast was seduction. During preparation I thought of this song and performed it solo. Gus told me that he liked the different perspective I brought to the song and that I should record it that way, so I did.

The second cover version is "End Of The Line" by The Traveling Wilburys. I am huge fan of both the group and the song and I wanted to do it as a folk song.

The third cover is more of an adaption. "Don't Know What It Is" was written in swiss german by Stephan Eicher and Martin Suter. I had been wanting to adapt this long before I joined Stephan's band. The lyrics are very, very simple and elegant. After playing the original version more than a hundred times on the road the words just came flying in and I hope I did the original justice.

How would you describe the current state of the music industry?

Poor, desolate, disoriented. We are witnessing a steep decline. Most people in our parts of the world are less interested in culture in general. It moves to the background. Of course there are exceptions. It is also important to point out that the vast majority of the population of this planet simply do not have the luxury to care for arts, music and literature because they have to figure out how to survive on a daily basis.

The decline of the business aspect of the music industry has its advantages. I think it gives artists a certain freedom. At the same time it is becoming more and more difficult to reach your public because the mass media are flooded with streamlined content designed for the silent majority without noticing that this silent majority cannot be bothered to look

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up from their smartphones streaming commercials and propaganda 24/7.

Why do you write and sing in English?
Because I'm Swiss.

Do you think that streaming, Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal and all the others are the future?

At this point in time it looks like it. On the other end of the spectrum we are witnessing the vinyl revival, the comeback of the album. And high resolution audio finds its public. I think streaming is the biggest nail in the coffin of the music industry as we have come to know it. The major companies are continuing to dig their own graves because they are neglecting the artists.

It is not about art, it is about selling subscriptions which in turn make the consumer buy new tech devices. That is not a sustainable way to do business. What you also have to know is that the music business has been wiped out completely several times in the last hundred years. Good music can find its way to the public. That does not mean that it will. For each and every one of us there are at least ten albums that would change our lives. We will never hear them.

You go on quite a bit about how you appreciate good audio quality. Do you really think anyone cares?

Yes I do. We were led to believe that you can get rid of 90 percent of the information that is required to store music digitally and that it would not matter as far as the perception of sound is concerned. That was a flat lie. The

invention of the mp3 format turned out to be a disaster. Whole generations are growing up without ever being exposed to the sound of an instrument. What they hear is a fraction of the sound this instrument or a human voice produces. mp3s, iTunes format and Spotify, all these digital formats lack dimension, overtones and breath. Our brains work like crazy to correct and compensate this while listening. That is why it is so tiring and why the wonder and miracle of music is getting lost. We go to a lot of trouble to get sound right and then it is played on tiny laptop speakers. It is like looking at Monet or Pollock paintings on a fucking smartphone screen. Or watching "Lawrence Of Arabia" on a tablet. It just does not make any sense. There are alternatives.

Where does your seemingly endless fascination with guitars come from?

Because they have limitless potential. A guitar is a very primitive, yet incredibly elegant instrument. Guitars are magic carpets, living mythology. They can transport you to another level. A guitar can also show you the way to a certain musical place. A good guitar is never finished, it keeps coming up with surprises. The better I know this instrument, the more I want to know. The fascination keeps growing and I know that I will be really busy trying to keep up.

What are your plans for the immediate future?

First I will take "This Place Belongs To The Birds" on the road. After the release of

"Songsmith" in spring 2014 I started playing with my new trio with Tom Etter and Simon Baumann. Tom plays with Zueri West, a very successful pop rock band over here. He is a very versatile guitar player, equally at home on acoustic and electric. Like me he enjoys playing rhythm and is into low tunings big time. We connect on all kinds of different levels and it's just a dream to play with him. Simon I got to know on the tours we did with Stephan Eicher. When you play a hundred shows five feet away from somebody's bass drum you know what you're in for. He comes out of the electronic scene, so he knows his way around samplers. But he also plays shuffles and straightforward beats like an old guy. That's a rare combination. Having a trio with no bass player gives me great versatility, a lot of what we do on stage is improvised. I love that.

I will also play some all acoustic solo shows with these songs. Maybe there will be a looper here and there but mostly it's just voice and guitar, so the songs can go back to where they came from and I can also throw in some obscure folk songs that I like to play.

When that tour is over I have a film score to work on for an exciting documentary. I have also started writing new songs for an album we will do with the trio. Three guys in one room, all instruments bleeding into one another, no separation whatsoever – and no overdubs, all live, no mixing, direct to two-track. So far these are all uptempo, rocking, electric songs. We will record in a studio that has all the forties and fifties equipment, tubes and tapes, sparks will fly.

This Place Belongs To The Birds is released on the 18th of September 2015

on CD (BLUDP0667) and LP + CD (BLULP0667)

Also available through various digital retailers, but not on Spotify, Tidal and other streaming services.

First pressing includes a free download for a one hour bonus live album by The Hank Shizzoe Trio, recorded in 2015.

Record Label

Blue Rose Records, D-Abstatt/Germany, attn: Edgar Heckmann

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Distribution

edel (D, A), Musikvertrieb (CH), Shellshock (UK), Sonic Rendezvous (NL, B), I.R.D. (I), Rootsy (S), Avispa (E), Compact (P)

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