

## Jim of Seattle interview from 2012

It was a dark night.

Jim of Seattle started writing songs at the piano in his unheated basement in 1980, secretly and alone. Several hundred songs were written in that basement. One was a local hit on indie radio. Two from that day are re-imagined on this album. Jim has written a lot of music since then - for theatre, for the cult classic Disney video game "Nightmare Ned", for Star Trek comic book operas, for the hell of it. He studied composition in college. He taught classes. His biggest notoriety has come through the piano piece "Welcome to Windows", a duet with the sounds from Microsoft Windows XP. Jim refuses to define his music by a genre. He jumps around a lot. But through it all a singular voice emerges.

The following interview is with Jim and GMR Prez Tom Dyer.

TD: You've been making music since the 80's. When we first met a year or so ago, you were already thinking about making this album. What made you think it was finally time?

Jim: For years my music has been very diverse, and while I've had enough music I thought was good enough for a CD, I've never felt like I had enough in any one style to be able to make a whole homogenous CD. The mix of musics would be too dissimilar, and it wouldn't hold together as a satisfying whole, but be just a random collection of songs that didn't go together but happened to be by the same guy. So yeah, I'd thought about it a lot, but nothing ever happened. I couldn't solve that eclecticism problem. And which style was really me? I didn't know. All of them at one time or other.

Then the green monkey wanted to hear a collection of my songs, and I auditioned for it 3 CDs of wildly diverse variety, I think it was 60 tracks. When it pointed at the dozen or so it liked best, it was an eclectic mix to be sure, but it also revealed this weird unity that I hadn't noticed in my music before. Once we settled on this collection of 17, the first thing I did was sit down to sequence them, and when I did, the character of the whole album revealed itself. I realized that if I re-wrote this song here, tweaked that song there, re-imagined that part like so, it wasn't so random after all. Sequencing the order that the songs would go in was the first thing I did for this project, and doing so solidified my vision for the whole process thereafter. Now instead of being just a collection of my songs, it had an identity as a larger single work. And just like that the eclecticism problem was gone. And what I ended up with was pretty much exactly what that original vision was.

TD: How did you record the album? Did you play everything?

Jim: Pretty much. My daughter is playing solo violin on a few tracks, including the opening overture melody. I have two tracks with a live guitar by Marc Griffin, and two tracks with live bass by Jim Graham. And a few vocals are very obviously not me. But everything else is home studio stuff.

TD: You've written musicals, songs for Disney, etc. correct? How is it different writing for musicians/singers who will perform your works and writing music where you play almost everything?

Jim: I have a lot more control over the finished product when I can do it all myself. I'm not a good collaborator, something I'm not proud of. I know exactly what I want something to sound like, and I will just want a performer to do it exactly that way. Of course they have their own talents to bring to the table, but when I'm in the midst of it, it's hard not to hear everything as wrong that doesn't fit what I am already hearing in my head. And then the social graces kind all mixed up in there, that whole inner dialogue of "Wow, they're working really hard, and they're really good, and I know they like it their way, so maybe I should be nice and let them do it that way even though that's not what I thought I wanted, but then am I going to resent it later on, or maybe I should just grow up and let other points of view in, but wait, I'm the composer here, but I don't want to be a jerk either, but..." and on and on and on and I lose sight of the original vision in the middle of all that. Creating music is hard enough without also wrestling with my interpersonal demons.

TD: In your songwriting process, do you generally start with music or words?

Jim: It totally depends. Most of them were simultaneous, because I treated words like another musical sound rather than being "lyrics" with meaning. One Beautiful Summer is an exception; it was words first, and the only song on the CD whose lyrics are about something personal to me. The Interludes were completely different words first, to which I wrote music, then swapped out for new words. I've written a lot of theatre music with real lyrics that tell stories and have clever rhymes and all that lyricist craft, but none of that made the cut for this project. My daughter wrote the lyrics to Martians when she was 7. For the most of the rest of it I hope people listen to the lyrics on this album as abstract images rather than trying to divine any specific meaning out of them.

TD: Do you ever perform live? Will you be performing this record in public?

Jim: My music life has been primarily working on my own compositions alone in a basement with a keyboard. I've had 30 years to hone that, whereas I've never performed live. Would you ask someone who'd played covers at a piano bar for 30 years but never written his own material to suddenly come out with an album of originals? I suspect my performing live would be like that. Who would want to hear that? - I'd be this total newbie up there. Doing what I do and performing on a stage are completely different skill sets. That said, if this album sold a billion copies and there was this bizarre demand for a live show, I wouldn't completely rule it out, but I'd need it to be a show, not just a concert. And I'd need a long time to rehearse. Confession: I don't even really like live music. What's wrong with me???

TD: Now that the album is (near) completed, how happy with it are you? Did you end up where you thought you'd be when you started or someplace completely different?

Jim: You know, to be perfectly honest, I'm completely and utterly satisfied with how this came out. The common answer to a question like this is usually something like "It was an evolving process, and a journey that took me to places I didn't even foresee at the outset", but really, this album sounds pretty much exactly like I initially wanted it to. It's almost identical to the original vision I had for it that weekend I first put the songs in order. With a few exceptions, the past year has been solely about working to realize that initial vision, and I'd be hard pressed to come up with a single moment in the whole album that is in any way a compromise. That's got to be rare, and will probably never happen to me again. A lot of thanks to you as well Tom, for pointing out where my mixes could improve.

TD: When you recorded your daughter singing Twinkle Twinkle many years ago did you think you would do something with it or was it just laying around and the idea came along much later? Is your daughter pleased you are releasing it or horrified?

Jim: Her official response is Horrified, but behind closed doors, it's probably closer to Pleased. The idea behind that song was to not change her vocals at all, and write the accompaniment to what she did, so there had to be all these key changes and stops and starts in there. Isn't that what parents always do, support their children in the background and let them become who they are? The challenge was to make it sound musically coherent. I've got a dozen more recordings of her from that "session". I'd like to do more of those.

TD: What kind of music do you listen to for enjoyment?

Jim: Oh goodness....In no order whatsoever: Philip Glass, Louis Armstrong, Radiohead, Harold Arlen, Richard Rodgers, The Residents, Grizzly Bear, Beatles of course, XTC, Beethoven piano sonatas, 70's pop, Sufjan Stevens, Fats Waller, Devo, Coltrane. Stop me anytime here... Star Wars soundtrack, Erik Satie, Sondheim, Pink Floyd, Benny Goodman, Beethoven symphonies. Please, make me stop... Nirvana, Goblin Market, Lester Young, Dada, aaahhhh..... must....don....headphones....

TD: How did the Jim of Seattle name come about?

Jim: Not a very interesting story. I was submitting a song to the wonderful online songwriting community Song Fight for the first time, and at the last minute, I realized that a band name was required. I was feeling some home town pride at the time I suppose, being a lifelong born and raised native, so Jim of Seattle came out after about 11 seconds' thought. I had no idea it would stick to me.

TD: What is the one thing I didn't ask that you think people should know?

Jim: The album is in three parts. Part One is kind of an introduction to prep the listener for the stylistic breadth; part two begins and ends with the Interludes and has a weather motif; and part three finishes with kind of a comic apocalypse. The album is very much intended to be heard in order. I think if it's listened to shuffled, it sounds like just an oddball collection of eclectic songs, but heard beginning to end in sequence there's a kind of strange sense to it all. The tune in the Overture and the tune to ABCD

Puppies are both quoted a bunch of times throughout the album, and I used certain instruments and lyric images in multiple songs to bind them all together. Bottom line: I know it's eclectic, ok? But if I was going to be truly honest with myself, which everyone says makes the best art, then I had to embrace the eclecticism, and do what I could to make it a unified sonic experience for the listener. I hope people don't think I'm just borrowing styles here, because I'm not. It's as honest an expression of who I am as I could make. I'm super happy with it.

TD: Is this the first of many albums or is this the grand statement to be followed by a return to the dark cave?

Jim: Well, let's see how this one does first. But assuming other people like it and it does ok, I am so pleased with how this one turned out that it's probably opened the floodgates for more. So yeah, I've got a list of ideas for projects that I want to start as soon as I'm done with this.