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Raphael Mann talks about his debut solo album, *The Changing Of The Seasons*

Q/ Walk us through the THEMES of your album?

It's quite a simple piece of work thematically, with a fairly precise focus. It's about leaving the big city - in my case London - being obliged to leave the place I considered to be home, when my daughter was born, for economic reasons, and coming to terms with living a less urban lifestyle. It's also about looking at nature through the eyes of an inquisitive child and learning about yourself in the process. It's about learning to find pleasure in simple things.

Q/ What was the overall CONCEPT that guided the creation of this album?

There was a certain sort of music that I desperately wanted to hear. I was listening to Vashti Bunyan and Nick Drake, but I was surprised at how much I was struggling to find enough music in that vein to listen to. So I decided to see if I couldn't make it myself. Which is how I came up with 'Rabbit Runs'. I was pleased with that song, and put it out as a single, and then decided to try to write an album around it.

The sound I was looking for was based around acoustic guitar picking, and a soft, English-accented voice, augmented with orchestrations for strings and woodwinds (I couldn't afford the strings this time!), and other acoustic instruments, hand percussion; creating a feeling of slowness, relaxation, warmth, contemplation; hopefully without getting boring; lyrics that are honest, influenced by the natural world...

Q/ How do you feel this album fits into your overall DISCOGRAPHY?

Weirdly it's my debut album as a solo artist...

I've made several collaborative albums as a producer or band member in recent years that I was very immersed in, with Art Terry & Sugarcane & Marianne Dissard & The Silver Panda, and it feels like a natural progression from those. They all informed it in one way or another. But it also feels like a return to what I started off doing as a teenager, writing songs on an acoustic guitar and singing them. In that respect I've come back full circle.

Q/ What role did MAREE CHOIE, your sole collaborator on the album, play in its production?

Maree and I have worked together on countless musical projects over the years. She's always a pleasure to work with. I used her voice & woodwind playing to create orchestrations for the songs, layering up parts. She's a very patient person, which is necessary for that kind of process, and she's also unfailingly in tune, and good at making sounds that harmonise well. The record would be a lot less rich without her presence.

Q/ How do you explain your attraction to the TROPICALIA sounds and music by mid-century Brazilian artists? How do you feel your album is tapping into that tradition? Is it mainly a rhythmic and musical thing or do you feel a connection to that music's themes?

This is an interesting question. I got into Brazilian music looking for fresh inspiration, and I had the chance to explore those influences as producer for Sugarcane, working with some great Brazilian musicians like the percussionist Alua Nascimento, and then again with The

Silver Panda. And those ideas have filtered through into my arrangements on *The Changing Of The Seasons*. This influence is mostly rhythmic and harmonic, but I agree that there's also an interesting cultural parallel, between Tropicalia especially, and the UK 'hippy folk' movement of the late 60s which was my biggest influence on the sound of the record - Nick Drake, Vashti Bunyan, Donovan, Sandy Denny, ISB, Kevin Ayers, Tyrannosaurus Rex and so on... As you rightly imply, both movements involved musicians looking to the older musical traditions of their home country as a way to create something new. Accepting US rock and r&b as influences, but not wanting to be constrained by them. Moving forward by looking back... The same thing was happening in the US itself of course at the same time, with Music From Big Pink and so on... It wasn't just about the rest of the world wanting to be free of American influence, and looking for authenticity; it was also part of a general move away from consumerism and 'modernism'... Going up the country, going back to the Garden...

Q/ Tell us more about the album ARTWORK?

When I released the first single from the album, 'Rabbit Runs' - before I knew it was going to be an album - I asked Maree if she'd draw me a rabbit for the cover (drawing is another of her skills!), which she did, and I messed about with ways of incorporating the drawing into a cover design. I ended up doing a series of paintings, which I cut up and collaged together, and then I cut out the shape of Maree's rabbit illustration and laid the paint collage behind it.

This fairly random process became my method for the rest of the album artwork. I made a similar image for each of the 10 songs, and a more detailed one for the album cover itself; all using drawings that Maree made from my brief. I liked the contrast we arrived at between earthy, natural tones and bold bright colours from the paint. The background that I used for all the images is actually a photo of a brown paper bag.

Q/ You've been making VIDEOS for your own releases and that of others for some time now. Tell us about that process?

I started off making videos because I couldn't afford to pay anyone else to, and ended up coming to enjoy it for its own sake. Now I feel like its part of the same artwork as the music and the visual imagery. It's such a big part of how the music is experienced that I wouldn't want anybody else to do it. It wouldn't feel personal enough... I prefer to take a DIY approach wherever I can.

The videos for this album grew out of the process of creating the cover artwork. I used the same paintings that I did for the single covers as layers of colour for the videos. The filmed footage is very simple - just me against a white wall in my living room, singing the songs, filmed on my phone, but brought to life by using those paint colours in place of natural colour. Again, I arrived at the process first for 'Rabbit Runs', from just experimenting, and that set the tone for the videos for the rest of the songs. It created a strong look.

Q/ What is most ORIGINAL about your work at this stage and with this album?

I think the most original element is probably the chord patterns that I write. I set out very deliberately with this album to write within a particular style that already existed. There was an element of familiarity that I wanted it to have. I wanted it to be easy to listen to. I wanted it to feel peaceful and soothing and have a warmth and a sort of homeliness to it. Because that was the sort of music I was craving to listen to myself. I couldn't find enough of it that suited my mood, so I decided I'd make an album myself that did.

But I think I'm so used to messing around with unusual chord sequences that I can't help doing it. So despite the feeling of familiarity it hopefully has, there's some less generic movement happening under the surface.

Q/ Which song on the album best represents the CORE SOUND of your artistry?

Difficult question, because this album is only one small corner of my overall artistry. Instead I'll tell you my favourite songs on the album - 'Rabbit Runs', because it did exactly what I set out to do, but also hit upon some magic of its own; 'When We Have The Time', because it has a freshness to it that makes me happy; and it got me addicted to writing in 5/4; and 'Pink & Green Emperor', because it's the most straightforwardly honest thing I've ever written.

Q/ Are there any personal experiences woven into the LYRICS?

Yes. All the lyrics pretty much are based on moments from life... Whether it's my first encounter with a grey heron, or a rabbit running across my path in the forest... My daughter picking up a beautiful dead moth from the ground and bursting into tears... Being chased away by angry swans that reminded me of people I know... Noticing the cycles of different trees flowering on my daily walks and finding I remembered different events in the year by them... Lying in bed not wanting to get up because it was too cold and wishing spring would come soon, or at least Christmas... Leaving London in search of a place I could raise a child in some kind of peaceful environment... Learning that my childhood friend couldn't afford to live in London either, even though he'd worked his whole life as a driver on the London Underground... And reaching back into childhood; to the weeping willow tree in my parents' garden in Yorkshire where I used to play with my sister, before they divorced and we had to leave... The colliery town I lived in as a young schoolboy, where every other kid's dad was a miner... Lots of little pieces of my life are in there...

Q/ What did you LEARN about yourself as an artist through the process of creating this album?

I refined the process that I've been developing over my recent album productions of being able to work alone without needing a studio or anything else that I don't have at home. The whole thing was done in my little bedroom. Succeeding in finishing an album that I really like by working that way feels very freeing.

I also feel like I exorcised a need that I had, to make a very traditional, song-based album, with my voice up front; very linear and focused and staying in one particular sound-world. I think I needed to do that first in order to be able to go in other directions afterwards.

Q/ What are your HOPES for how listeners will react to this album?

I hope they'll give it a little bit of their time, to listen without too many distractions. It works well if you put headphones on, perhaps on a train journey or a walk in the park, let it wash over you... I hope it will make people feel calmer and a little bit free from the hubbub...

Q/ What are your creative GOALS for the future following this release?

I'm already halfway through making the next album, which is intentionally very different from this one; a lot more abstract and experimental and spontaneous.

I'm happy as long as I can keep moving and not repeat myself. Keeping myself interested is the most important goal for me.