MITCH
HAMPTON
PIANO
HARD
LISTENING
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FINE MUSIC

HARD LISTENING

It may be both truism and cliché that a creative artist never knows when inspiration will strike, but in the curious case of the present recording of original music composed for piano, the saying bears repeating.

The first idea came while I was watching one of my favorite movies, *Lifeguard* from 1976, with Sam Elliot and Ann Archer. The setting is a scene in which lifeguard Sam Elliot is being entertained at home on a date with a high school sweetheart he has not seen since high school. The Archer character puts on a record with a female singer and guitar. It is not very audible in the mix but definitely is a style specific and meaningful to the character of an attractive young single mom at that time. For a few seconds she looks at her record player while Sam Elliot is talking with a look of concern on her face. She is concerned about whether this very masculine character would like or tolerate her music, I think. Then, turning to him, she says, "do you like that kind of music? I can put something else on." He replies with assurance and confidence that it is fine and even "nice." The music is palpable, emotive and earnest. While not a name artist it is strikingly similar to the female oriented singer-songwriter music of the period, figures such as Janis Ian, Carole King, or even Judee Sill. The whole exchange is extraordinarily subtle.

This scene in turn sparked in me a meditation on musical style itself and the role of disparate and varying tastes in society. What does it mean for someone to accept or reject a musical language or style? What do the differences in style mean for people? My goal was to ask such philosophic questions in an aesthetic manner, that is, by writing and performing concert

styled solo piano music that aimed to dissolve all boundaries of style or taste. I like to see what happens when disparate or contrasting styles are put together. I like to think that there is as much unity and harmony as disunity and tension to be found in the combinations.

This brief moment in the film *Lifeguard* would eventually inspire me to compose *Feminist Singer-Songwriter Song Without Words*, an attempt to reflect on that period of time politically, socially and musically in the form of the solo piano wherein I use "folk" like elements but then transform them into something quite apart from their original articulation.

In particular, with regard to musical language, I feel that the languages developed by the great African-American jazz musicians, the Broadway and Hollywood popular composers, and the Soul and R&B popular performers were among the richest contributions to music history. My music is admittedly frankly tonal, in the "principles of the major/minor system" as composer Claus Ogerman described his own work. I feel that the turn toward totally serialized or atonal music and the rejection of the possibilities of extended tonal language can at times be as dogmatic as a slavish reproduction of traditional tonal language, and, paradoxically for a style claiming to be new and advanced, a missed opportunity for musical color. I am reminded of what pianist Barry Harris said: that "to be bored by the basic key of C major is to be bored with music itself." For me music is about the art object, the piece of music in itself, which communicates emotion quite powerfully on its own, quite apart from specific representational associations. As Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky said music is special in that it "reaches into the very soul." As such, rhythm, harmony, melody and other traditional devices are part of my palette. For me these building blocks of music have innate and intrinsic value quite apart from their extramusical or sociological meanings and implications.

I don't want to say too much about the music individually. In general it is a blend of strictly written and freely improvised sections. Don Cornelius, of course, is a dedication to the late host of *Soul Train*, which I grew up watching as a child in the 70's and early 80's. The musical motif here is the bass line and lower register of the piano: this sets the mood for the entire work. The *Petite Dirge* is inspired by Chopin and other 19th century piano composers but brought into a 20th century context. The *Large Dirge in memory of my father* is an elegy for my late father, Aubrey Hampton. The piece has a traditional ABA structure and it is based on the form of the Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart standard *Where Or When*, a standard which my father claimed was his favorite song and further clamed was about reincarnation.

The *Hard Listening* series of pieces is titled humorously as are the individual pieces, somewhat like Eric Satie, Frank Zappa, or some of the minimalists. It is a musical commentary on the concept and label of so-called "Easy Listening" music and is in part a philosophic inquiry into what it means that a society labels certain styles of music as more serious than others, or "cheesy"

or dated. As a composer and improviser I find there is a lot of richness to be found in so-called déclassé material. I wouldn't want to rob myself of the expressive possibilities to be found in certain harmonic styles. I tried to go as far as possible with using a lot of this very basic and at times clichéd material in the context of a complex or "classical" form. I wanted to at once preserve the blatant quality of the motifs while expanding upon them without surrendering their emotional effect. I was also interested in using "minimalist" gestures but with a richer harmonic language than mere triads. I am interested in extremes: slowness for example, or more repetition than usual. Emotionally I like to use both the earnest and the silly. The sequence of pieces ranges from the Hollywood inspired impressionism of *For Victor Young*, to the difficult dissonance and angularity of *Crossover Hit*. *Music for Movie* is inspired by the guitar stylings of Oscar Castro-Neves that some of the minimalists are fond of emphasizing. The influences are too numerous to mention. I initially got the idea for this piece, aside from watching the movie *Lifeguard*, from my collection of easy listening album covers of the 60s and 70s, especially the beauty of the women on the album covers and from my curiosity about the differences between popular vocal as opposed to instrumental music. I have always been musically inspired by music that is considered pre-Rock & Roll, (or otherwise unhip or square), partly because I like it and partly because I feel the common dismissal of such music as arbitrary and aesthetically narrow. To me it is all part of an American musical heritage, understood as broadly and inclusively as is possible.

I would like to thank my mentor in piano, the great Stanley Cowell. I would like to dedicate this recording to the memory of Cedar Walton, Mulgrew Miller, George Duke, and Hank Jones. The piece *Music for Film* is dedicated to the late Oscar Castro-Neves.

MITCH HAMPTON was born in 1967 in New York City, was educated at Interlochen Arts Academy and received a bachelors and Masters from New England Conservatory of Music. His piano teacher and mentor while there was Stanley Cowell. His composition instructor was Thomas McKinley.

His *Piano Concerto for Improvised Jazz Piano and Orchestra* was performed by him and recorded with the Czech Radio Orchestra. He has written *The Four Humors*, a double clarinet and flute concerto for Richard Stolzman and Mike Feingold. His work for Richard Stolzman, called *Back To Bacharach: a Tone Poem for Clarinet and Orchestra* was premiered at Boston's Symphony Hall. His *Swinging Seventies* was a concerto for flute and orchestra featuring Mike Feingold, originally performed at Boston's Symphony Hall and released in 2011 by PARMA Recordings. In 2000 he wrote a children's jazz piano concerto for the Somerville Arts Council. His String Quartet was commissioned and performed by the Ciompi Quartet at Duke University and subsequently performed by the Boston Composers Quartet on National Public Radio and recorded by the Boston Composers Quartet. In 1997 he was the soloist on his piano concerto called *Dark Dancing*, written for the New York Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Gerald Schwarz and premiered at Avery Fisher Hall. He wrote a Suite for flute and piano: *Glass Houses* (dedicated to Michelangelo Antonioni) that was premiered by Robert Stallman at Weill Recital Hall. He wrote a chamber concerto called *La Luna* in memory of Federico Fellini which premiered at Duquesne University School of Music and was performed by the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble. His *Jazz Taxonomies for Saxophone Quartet* was performed by the Berlin Saxophone Quartet at Weill Recital Hall. A partial list of his

many jazz compositions includes *Ballad For Billy Strayhorn*, *Why Is That?*, *For John*, *Permanent Residence*, *Stroll, Strut And Stroll*, *Vegan Soul Food*, and series of *Original Blues* in Small, Medium and Large.

In the 1980s and 1990s he has worked as a solo pianist in cocktail lounges and hotels, played with the flugelhornist Dmitri Matheny the Bill and Bo Winiker Ensemble, had a brief stint in a rock group, and accompanied many singers in lounges and in cocktail bars. He also performed professionally in an ensemble formed by the late George Russell in local jazz clubs. In 2010 and in 2013 he wrote music for two independent films by director Andrew Bujalski, Beeswax, and Computer Chess, as well as composing and performing music for a music and fashion video for Bob Packert Productions. He has collaborated as a pianist with the poet Mark Schorr in live performance. A non-fiction commentator, critic, and essayist, he maintains a blog, The Moderate Contrarian, and for thirty years was a writer for the journal *Organica*. He has contributed critical essays to *Spirited Magazine*. He is currently writing a Concertino for flugelhornist Dmitri Matheny and a piano quintet for which the piano part is improvised. In 2010 he was featured performing piano and discussing his craft in a documentary film, *Correspondence*, directed by Jose Luis Guerin and Jonas Mekas. HARD LISTENING is his first recording of only solo piano.

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Product Manager **Jeff LeRoy**
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MITCH HAMPTON PIANO

1 THE ROYAL BLUE TRICKLE SUITE FOR PIANO 10:15

2 PETITE DIRGE 4:18

HARD LISTENING (SERIES FOR SOLO CONCERT PIANO)

3 FOR VICTOR YOUNG 5:50

4 SCORE FOR A FILM WITH AN INTERNATIONAL ALL STAR CAST 9:58

5 CROSSOVER HIT 4:01

6 FEMINIST SINGER SONGWRITER SONG WITHOUT WORDS 12:33

7 GOODBYE CORNELIUS (DON CORNELIUS) 9:52

8 LARGE DIRGE IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER 11:46

(BASED ON THE FROM OF WHERE OR WHEN, RICHARD RODGERS AND LORENZ HART)

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