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ALBUM REVIEW: Some Places Are Forever Afternoon by Wayne Horvitz

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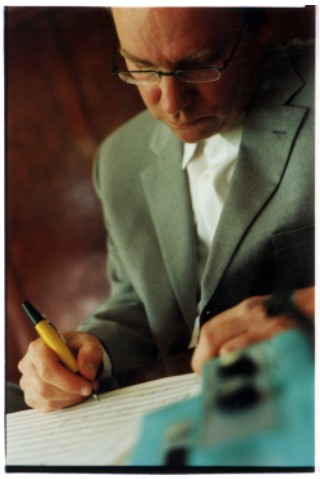

"When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it," wrote the Pacific Northwest poet Richard Hugo. "One is that all music must conform to the truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music."

Hugo was a proponent of the latter. The quote comes from "The Triggering Town," his 1979 book of lectures and essays on poetics. Throughout the essays he advocates an approach to poetry based on "triggering" subjects and words. According to Hugo, triggering subjects help the poet enter into the realm of the imagination—they enable the poet to explore, to seek the unknown, and to create without limitation.

This unique notion of triggering was one of the things that inspired Seattle-based composer and pianist Wayne Horvitz to explore Hugo's poetry through music. His latest album, titled "Some Places Are Forever Afternoon," is a collection of 12 instrumental compositions inspired by Hugo poems. There is one major difference, though: Horvitz uses no words.

"This was something entirely new for me, to accept this concept that it's not the poem at all—there are no words in it," Horvitz said of the project. "But it is some kind of reincarnation musically of the poem."

The album features a musical amalgamation of two of Horvitz's quartets: the jazz troupe Sweeter than the Day and the contemporary classical chamber group the Gravitas Quartet. On the album, Horvitz plays piano, organ, and electronics alongside cornetist Ron Miles, bassoonist Sara Schoenbeck, cellist Peggy Lee, guitarist Tim Young, bassist Keith Lowe, and drummer Eric Eagle.

Each piece unfolds slowly and patiently, much like Hugo's poetry. Borrowing from jazz, classical, electronic, and improvised musical styles, Horvitz evokes the frayed landscapes, the rural stillness, and the compressed images present in much of Hugo's work.

"[With this record] I was a little more willing to let the ideas develop in a certain way, to let each phrase lead quietly to the next phrase—because he does that a lot in his poems, they unfold slowly in a really beautiful way," Horvitz said.

Each piece gets its title from one of the lines in a corresponding Hugo poem—whichever line triggered Horvitz. As for the album's title track, "Some places are forever afternoon" is a line from a poem which appears at the end of the album.

“Words are the same as music,” Horvitz said. “You love a phrase and it gets stuck in your head and you want to hear it again. That’s the way I felt about that line—I just wanted to hear it over and over again.”

From the melancholy calm of “Money or a story” to the moody dissonance and despondency of “you drink until you are mayor,” each piece comes from a different place, a different story, a different poem.

Many of Hugo’s poems were inspired by small towns and odd places he visited—seemingly dreary dwellings where he found a sparkle of inspiration. Horvitz’s “those who remain are the worst” embodies a slow and contemplative atmosphere with soft, soulful glimmers of hope shining through the cornet and guitar solos. “Nothing dies as slowly as a scene” is brimming with Americana nostalgia, at times even evoking the groove of a jukebox before the scene burns out.

“I like to imagine what people’s lives are like,” Horvitz said of his compositional process. “And that’s exactly what Hugo did. He’d go into a town and hang out in a café or a bar, and he wasn’t concerned with his poetry being accurate, he was just concerned with where his imagination went. But he took inspiration from the people he saw and the places he went—and I think that’s something we have in common.”

Horvitz’s “in some other home” brings to mind a rustic, rural landscape—a quiet and unassuming gem of a town. A gently glimmering piano riff opens this charming and sweet little tune before the piece leisurely wanders through a string of solos.

The longest piece on the album is “The car that brought you here still runs,” a piece inspired by Hugo’s most famous poem, “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg.” The piece drifts through a delicate opening chorale before shifting through free jazz improvisations and chamber music stylings. Listen for the charming piano and cello theme about halfway through—Horvitz counts it as one of the loveliest moments on the album.

But there are plenty of memorable moments on this record; each piece is brimming with nostalgia for both real and imagined landscapes. Although according to Hugo, the music is more important than the reality anyway.

“Besides,” Hugo wrote, “If you feel truth must conform to music, those of us who find life bewildering and who don’t know what things mean, but love the sounds of words enough to fight through draft after draft of a poem, can go on writing—try to stop us.”