

GERRY HEMINGWAY AND SONGS

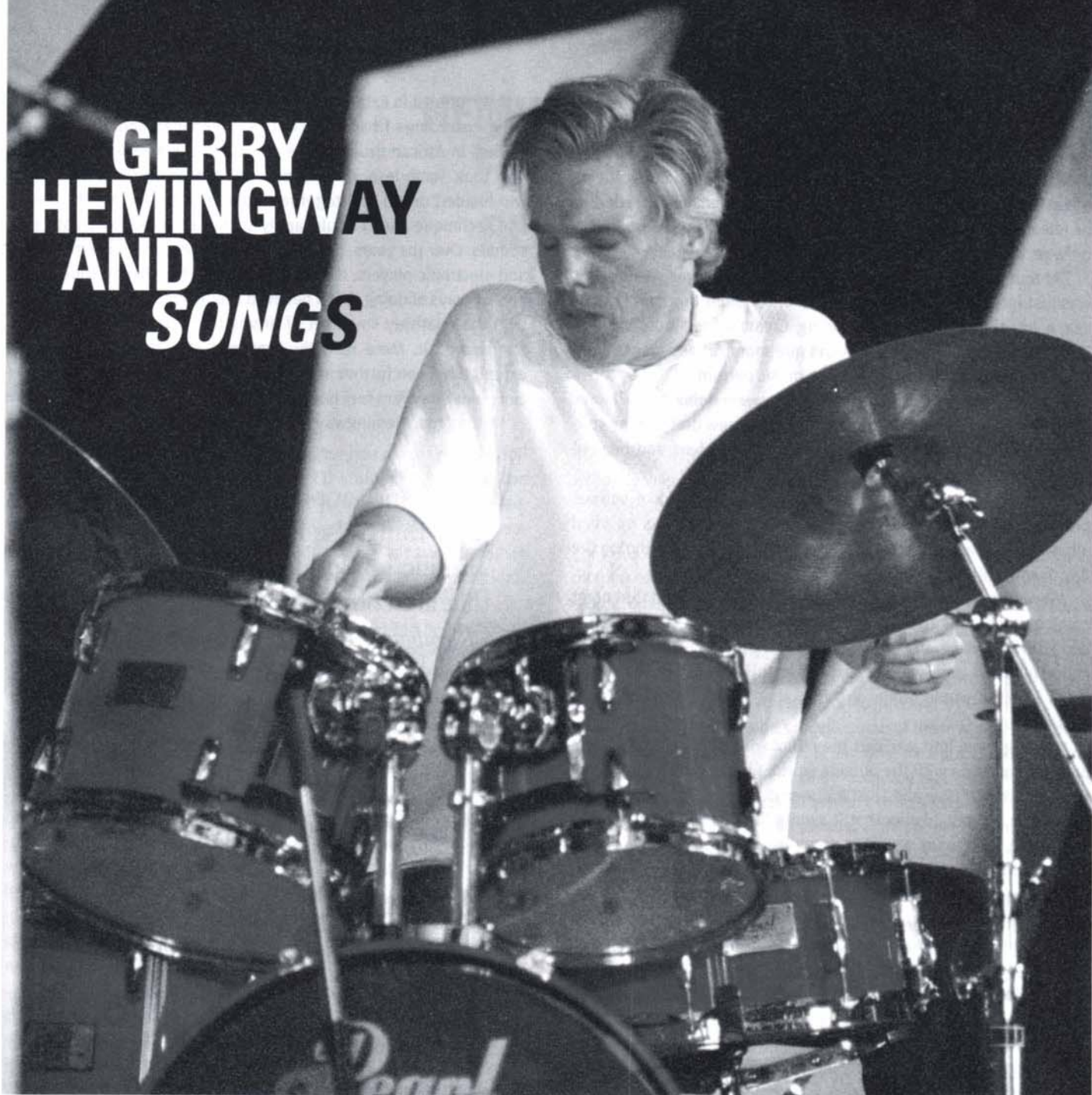


Photo by Laurence Svirchov

By JAMES HALE

His lean frame hunched, his boyish face a study in concentration, few people look as serious behind a drum kit as Gerry Hemingway.

At 48, the Connecticut native has built a reputation as a consummate professional who brings a rigorous pursuit of perfection to any improvisational situation. Through his 12-year tenure with Anthony Braxton to latter-day relationships with fellow Braxton alumnus Marilyn Crispell, trombonist Ray Anderson, cellist Ernst Reijseger and pianist Georg Graewe, the drummer has always appeared to epitomize Valerie Wilmer's classic book title about improvising musicians: *As Serious as Your Life*.

For those whose only encounters with Hemingway have been through his intense accompaniment, his sonic barrier-busting solo

performances or his more recent meshing of classical and electronic music, the wordplay and instrumental construction of his CD *Songs* might well come as a surprise. But, far from a break with the past, the pop-influenced soundscape of *Songs* brings Hemingway back to the familiar territory of his adolescence.

Although he had studied piano since he was seven, when The Beatles captured America by way of *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a new instrument captured his imagination.

"My wanting to play the drums was a real boy thing. Everybody I knew wanted to play the drums and it was the coolest thing to do. I just thought the guys who were playing the drums were totally cool and I wanted to be like them."

His parents started him off with a snare drum and a single cymbal, and when Gerry's interest hadn't waned after a year they bought him the 1964-vintage set of Ludwigs that continue to form the basis

of his primary kit today. Lessons with a local teacher didn't work out, so Hemingway began a near-obsessive program of self-study and experimentation that continues today.

"For me, it was really a cross between therapy and music. I was releasing something of myself into this instrument that needed to be released. It was a place for me to go, and my parents were, thankfully, very tolerant of this cacophony of sound I was making.

"At that time – 1965, '66, '67 – the music scene was so vibrant it was just incredible, and with the help of my older brothers I got to see a lot of live concerts, including Cream's first tour and Jimi Hendrix, numerous times. My technique more or less comes from my energy and excitement at hearing music performed live by those people. I wanted to be able to do what they were doing. I didn't have a technical clue about how to get there, but I knew that just my spirit and enthusiasm were enough to keep me involved and headed toward that goal."

A strong student in several areas, he began to make serious progress when the private high school in which he was enrolled allowed him to advance one academic year and clear time during the day to concentrate on music.

"My entire understanding of music and composition at that point came out of listening to recorded music. I was a voracious listener, and I developed a pretty interesting record collection – perhaps 300 or 400 albums – and I was very experimental in my listening, extending it into the whole range of things that would be called World Music today.

"What got me into jazz was the radio, which was my other form of communication with the outside world. I heard things like Jimmy Cobb on *Kind Of Blue* and I just imitated it. I really didn't know what he was doing, but I knew that it swung like mad. I just loved the sound of jazz drumming – that sound on the ride cymbal – and I wanted to be able to play like that.

"At that point I still had no instruction. I went to the Berklee College of Music for one semester, but I was lacking in some of the skills I needed, like reading big band drum music quickly. I could read, but not very fast. It wasn't until after I left the school that I went back to Boston and took lessons with Alan Dawson for two-and-a-half years. That's what comprised the core of my technical development on the instrument. He provided a very firm technical bedrock from which to build an articulate language. Every two weeks I would drive up from New Haven and take a lesson. The thing about Alan is that you never saw anyone play with such precision and clarity, and when he demonstrated even the most basic rudiment you were just inspired. I left every lesson determined to try to play those things as well as he could. I worked like hell on his lessons. I was so obsessed at that point that I practiced six hours a day. I was incredibly inspired by him and that's such a great testament to any teacher."

Hemingway credits a drummer from an even earlier era than Dawson with inspiring his exploration of using the standard drum kit in new ways.

"One of the first people I saw who played with his hands and showed me what was possible was Jo Jones. Willie Ruff ran a program at Yale University called the Conservatory Without Walls and that's where I got to hear Jo Jones. I never actually attended Yale, but I hung out, audited some courses, and basically hand-picked my education that way. Jo Jones was like a glossary of techniques that he had developed for various circumstances.

"My interest in extended techniques comes out of my listening to those recordings I had collected as a teenager, and also to some studies in African drum, dance and song at Wesleyan University. I also took some lessons in South Indian mridangam (a traditional two-headed drum) and together those things gave me the theory and technique that I could apply to the drum kit to create new sounds. Over the years, playing with a lot of experimental musicians and electronic players, it became an issue of matching sounds and finding ways of doing that. I believed I could create a world of sound with the relatively small set of drums that I use, and that's how I approached it. More recently, I've been able to use samplers to extend that even further and add more colors to the palette. Now I can paint however I feel like painting."

In the '70s, Hemingway took the unusual step of notating the

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non-traditional techniques he had developed, using graphic symbols to represent every rub, scrape and sound manipulation he might use. At the same time, he began a study of the methods of sound reproduction that has made him as conversant in studio techniques as most engineers. Today, he can debate the relative merits of two versus three overhead microphones and knows exactly how he wants his drums to sound in any given situation.

"I want the experience of listening to a CD to be successful. It's an artificial situation for the listener, and you have to manipulate things as much as you can to compensate for that so you end up with a natural and transparent sound. When I play live I want a very orchestral sound with a fluid, wide, dynamic and tonal range, and I want that to translate onto recordings, as well."

Once you understand the pop music roots of Hemingway's style and add that to his interest in recording technology, *Songs* seems a very logical extension for a musician who has existed for so long on music's cutting edge.

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"For two years, I basically put my usual business on hold so that I pursued this, but I don't really view it as a departure. Instead, it's more like integrating my whole experience into one new project." ■

HEMINGWAY ENTERS THE REALM OF ART SONG

BY LAURENCE SVIRCHEV

A casual glance at the covers of glossy jazz magazines, a stroll through the aisles of any large CD store, or a squint at the fashion pages handily demonstrates the cult of handsome, competent, and female singers who tirelessly and tediously repeat the canon of 50-70 year old jazz standards. The glossy journalism that surrounds them celebrates their fine looks, calls the music jazz, and blatantly ignores more accomplished artists.

Enter Gerry Hemingway's art-song project. *Songs* is a series of original lyrical and instrumental pieces incorporating elements of pop, new music, and improvisation. The songs unfold novella-like as real-life stories personalized from the ecstasy and agony of human emotion. The rhythms, harmonies, and melodies of each song are strikingly dissimilar and the improvisations that lace through each song make for evocative listening. *Songs* has the rawness of edgy pop music but the secret appeal is its complex musicality.

Erudite jazz listeners have for the most part placed their listening needs in the camp of the instrumentalist. Instrumental and lyric composition are usually considered related but distinct crafts (think Rogers and Hart or even Lieber and Stoller). In the jazz world, Steve Lacy is celebrated for his melodies and harmonies set to ancient and contemporary poetry. Betty Carter, Sheila Jordan and Louis Armstrong have been prominent for using their voices as instruments to create sounds beyond the realm of words. Musicians like Mingus had specific projects for the integration of poetry with music. But the number of jazz musicians who write both music and lyric is limited.

Furthermore, American jazz-song has been generally alienated from the tradition of European art-song (a major exception being Brecht and Weill). Hemingway, however, has become familiar with the elements of many musics, both through the musical company he keeps and the curiosity of his own listening habits. To his career in jazz and improvised music you can add credits in electro-acoustic solo and chamber works, and now a Guggenheim fellowship on which he'll compose for a symphony orchestra.

So why did he undertake the challenges of writing *Songs*? Hemingway seems to need to do something *different*. He told me that "I felt the need to express ideas and feelings in a more direct medium than instrumental music. I also wanted to make a recording that was especially for my wife for very personal reasons. And I wanted to create a CD that would rival the popularity of the recordings that get listened to the most in our household. We share the enjoyment of an eclectic mix of gospel, pop, country, Afro-pop,

blues, jazz, lieder, Afro-Cuban, folk and bluegrass singers and song-writers. I was curious to see how I'd fare in such fast company."

Hemingway reacts directly and emotionally to the world around him and is candid about the sources of his lyrics, not reticent in speaking about the personal: "There is a diversity of lyrical content on this recording and some of it is coming directly out of my life experience. When I started writing these songs I had hit a bottom where I really had no choice but to confront some of the core issues of my life, a painful but worthwhile lifelong process, and I know there are many who can relate to this journey. I also began to delve more deeply into what life was offering as lessons and writing these songs was a way to reflect on and process some of these experiences.

"The recording is dedicated to my wife Nancy, and indeed some of the lyrics grew directly out of our ongoing dialogue and relationship. Her multi-layered way of viewing things helped stimulate my writing process. Sometimes a phrase, or a succinct metaphor, would become the kernel for me to expand into a full song. Take the piece 'Time to Go.' In general it's about being able to distinguish between being adored for what you do, the image of who you are as a performer, and being your true self in an intimate relationship. There can be a tendency to favor work and fantasy over true intimacy."

"Time to Go" takes the listener through the two-world contrast that performers inhabit: the road, the music-making, and the applause, and on the other hand the intimacy of home life. Hemingway asks, "The glory we felt is over now, home sweet home is real but how?" And he answers the question in the last stanza of this last cut, a denouement to the emotional odyssey of the song series:

"Here I am now, back in my world
making breakfast again, I am listening to Merle
I hope those I love, remember all of me
Not easy to be back/ then leave"

Songs covers a wide range of settings, as the reference to country singer Haggard might suggest. There is "Succotash," a funky dance piece; "In Your Arms," a sultry and sexy serenade about reunion, and there is "Out of the Trees" with its slow instrumental pace countered by high-velocity singing of the lyric. It is a song that explores the fine lines between staying in a relationship or leaving it:

"I dig into emptiness, looking for clues that lie
Between the forest of forgiveness and the wish to die"

Hemingway employs a female voice, that of Lisa Sokolov, an aesthetic choice that abstracts the songs' emotions from his own experience. Of Sokolov he says, "I began working with her a few years ago in the context of her trio and quartet. She seemed to understand without any hesitation the process I was using for shaping these songs. Mostly I sang the song for her and did my best to convey with my limited vocal technique the melodic shape, phrasing, dynamic flow and emotional intent. She took the ball and ran with it, bringing the songs to life."

It took him two years to complete *Songs*, the longest he has taken on a project. "I had never written a song and had no idea how to go about doing it. At first I simultaneously developed some musical sketches and some lyric, but they were not connected. For a long time I wrote only lyric, which I wrote with a musical sensibility particularly concerning the rhythmic phrasing and rhyming. The content of the lyric was always my guide. Eventually I was generating lyric from musical ideas and vice versa, which of course was when I had really found my groove with the project."

Hemingway normally rehearses and records the material with all musicians present. The limited budget for *Songs* precluded the normal intimacy of the jazz recording process. So he went for the process well known to the pop world: record one musician at a time: "This allowed me to incorporate more musicians than I might have otherwise by recording material when and wherever I met up with Wolter Wierbos, Thomas Lehn, and John Butcher. The rest of the material was recorded round the corner from where I live directly into my computer in a very small studio. As I worked with each musician we had the opportunity to delve more deeply than usual into the material we were working on in a relaxed and un-pressured way. That is not the case when the meter is ticking at a full-fledged, state-of-the-art studio."

The one composition on which Sokolov does not sing is "Anton," which fictionalizes the last moments in the life of serial composer Anton Webern (1883-1945), shot by an American GI after the cessation of hostilities in WWII. It opens with Hemingway's electronically transformed voice chanting:

"Out for a cigarette, time to die
hushed beauty lost on a soldier's scared eyes"

His lyric poetically summarizes what many musicians—as disparate in style as Webern himself and Count Basie—strive for in their music: "Not one tone without meaning, nothing more, nothing less."

According to Hemingway, "Putting aside the subtle reference to Nazi Germany in the audio poem that precedes the piece, the components of the piece are intentionally spare, not unlike Webern's style of expression. The bass line and on occasion the drum part offer continual aversion to expectation, which to some degree is one of the fundamental results of serial composing. Within this system Webern found his voice. He also made use of additional methods to layer a hidden meaning in his choice of pitches, which in the case of his 'Five Pieces for Orchestra' made references to his mother. I sampled various snippets of this composition, using them as rhythmic chords, not unlike a guitar player might 'comp' behind a soloist."

The horn soloists—Herb Robertson, Ellery Eskelin, Wolter Wierbos, and John Butcher—are not often associated with singers and yet they magically weave their way through the compositions,

both supporting Sokolov and making independent, improvisatory statements. Sokolov herself excels at extemporaneous singing.

Songs makes many of the stock patterns of the American songbook curiously passé. Hemingway has created a work that will pass the test of time not only because the emotions he writes about are universal, but because of the innate musicality of the compositions and the music-making of his band-mates. ■

Gerry Hemingway *Songs*

between the lines

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That's right, songs—real songs—with confessional lyrics even. And that's not all. There are subtle electronics here in the form of Thomas Lehn's analogue synthesizer and Hemingway himself plays (if that is what one does with them) samplers on several cuts. He sings too, or rather, does a sort of *Sprechstimme* on a spare and haunting retelling of Anton Webern's death. But it's the beat that takes center stage on *Songs* and it's a big one. Not dance-floor big, but Hemingway's liner notes confess "the enjoyment that comes with listening to popular song." He's clearly done a lot of that lately, and it shows, though the riff- and rhythm-oriented nature of the songs doesn't provide much latitude for the quirky turns of melody or structure that make Hemingway's compositions so delightful and memorable. And Gerry Hemingway the lyricist doesn't yet measure up to Gerry Hemingway the composer or bandleader. But it's still a kick to hear James Emery play wacka-wacka R&B rhythm guitar on acoustic, or Wolter Wierbos's soulful braying. With Herb Robertson, John Butcher, Ellery Eskelin and Kermit Driscoll (funkier on acoustic than electric) also aboard, the musicianship is first-rate and the ideas are agreeably out there. And vocalist Lisa Sokolov, given the chance, attacks her material with a sexy, Kitty Brazelton-ish aggression. I played this CD for a friend of mine who called it avant-garde back porch music. That's a pretty good description for the music of a composer and player who never stays in the same place for long.

John Chacona