

Sitting down with Andrew McKenna Lee
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This is the first time you've worked with an ensemble that very closely resembles a rock band. What was the writing process like? How much collaboration did it involve?

The project was put together much more like chamber music than like rock music. I would sit down with a guitar and write the structure of a song and its chord sequence, and would flesh it out from there, starting with the bass part and some sort of super cheesily programmed drum part. After I had those three things I would work on the other guitar part and the vocals. It was a process of building and layering. The music is very composed, it's very contrived, in a sense.

There was some collaboration with the drummer, Mike McCurdy. The rock producer Daniel Lanois said something once that really stuck with me, which is that you should never tell the drummer what to play. I had made drum charts, and there are certain tunes where I had very specific ideas about what I wanted the drums to do, but for the most part Mike kind of did his own thing. With the exception of the drums, though, everything else was pretty much scripted in traditional notation.

I think the next time around, if we get to make another project, I would like to start working more closely with the other members of the band in the creative process. For this particular time around though, I had this strong feeling that there was something I wanted to do with this project, and that I really had something to say and I knew what that was, and in the breathless mode of making it and figuring it all out, there wasn't a whole lot of room for creative collaboration. I want to stress, though, that everyone in the band worked enormously hard over the course of two and a half years to try and realize this music, and although we didn't necessarily collaborate creatively, there is an enormous amount of musical collaboration involved in realizing the parts, figuring out how to perform it, and trying to get to that emotional place to which the music aspires.

To my ear, the string quartet and the mallet percussion were peripheral to the voices, the guitars and the rhythm section. How did you think about their roles?

I think that's absolutely true. First of all, I approached this music as a collection of songs. There are a number of meanings in that for me; I think the biggest one is that it's about the vocals. The second thing was—well, I love rock music. Arguably, the most important, fundamental thing about a great rock band is having a great rhythm section, so that was also really important to me. And then there was this idea of wanting to get an orchestral type of sound, an orchestral type of texture. In an orchestra the strings are kind of the bedrock, and the winds, brass and percussion—of course this is a big generalization—don't play as often, and their roles are associated with certain colors. So there was this idea of inverting those roles,

letting the guitars take the role of the string section, letting them be the sort of chief middle ground element and then letting the strings and the percussion play the more auxiliary roles. When I decided to use strings, I was thinking about all those old 60s-era recordings, like Roy Orbison's, which have big string sections that function as background melodic and harmonic atmosphere and texture. There is definitely an aspect of wanting to connect with that old school string vibe in the context of 60s popular song.

In the 60s, you have a lot of vocal groups making popular music: The Mamas and the Papas, the Beach Boys, the Supremes, the Temptations, the Drifters. Three or four-part vocal groups singing in harmony—that was almost par for the course. I wouldn't go so far as to say that that doesn't exist anymore, but that kind of model in approaching popular music has kind of been left by the wayside. I was interested in addressing that, for a couple of reasons. First of all, I think it's such a beautiful sound, three or four people singing in harmony. The other reason is that I feel really exhausted, in pop and rock music, by the idea of there being a front man or front woman vocalist. If you have one singer, so much of the success of the music depends on that one singer and the charisma that that singer has as a performer, and that's not something that interests me a whole lot as a composer. I think it's cool to try to get back to the older model, to have three or four singers. This is the first vocal music I've ever written, and I think it's in huge part because, as an instrumentalist, I've always kind of resented the tyranny of the voice. Through the process of writing this music, I've kind of accepted that the minute you have vocals with a salient melody, singing words, the piece almost inevitably demands to be about that, but I feel like I had to find my own way into doing it. As I went along I really grew to love the sound of the voices, writing for them and working with them.

You've said the album is influenced by Renaissance polyphony and symphonic lieder.

I love listening to Palestrina, or Gesualdo, or Orlando di Lasso—these guys wrote such incredible music. Especially in the case of Gesualdo: the harmonies are so strange and often times so dissonant and weirdly balanced. And so my initial idea for the vocal sound of the record was that I wanted to cross Gesualdo with the Supremes. That idea led me to come up with a vocal texture that could not only blend in a homophonic way but that was also very contrapuntal. When you listen to Renaissance polyphonic music it has a certain flow to it that kind of feels like water, in the way the chords and the different lines move relative to one another. I wanted the vocals to have that very fluid, watery quality to them. The influence of symphonic lieder gets back to the sort of orchestral quality of the music. Anything involving the orchestra has this epic sweep—so many different colors and different instruments, and a big dynamic range—and I was trying to bring that quality to this music and this ensemble. I wanted the songs to be very dynamic, to really flow and to move to different spaces and different atmospheres. I wanted them to be big.

There's a piece by Lutoslawski called Les espaces du sommeil, written in 1975—it's this incredible 15-minute piece for baritone and orchestra, one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard, and it just has this incredible, slightly hallucinogenic, surreal kind of aspect to it. That was something I was trying to grasp with some of these songs, in terms of their dramatic

trajectory and how they move between different spaces. There's a song on the record, "Synchronesh," that I think captures that really well. And I think the first 5 tracks of the record are meant to be heard together, sort of like you might hear the first couple tracks on Dark Side of the Moon. So again, I was trying to think about larger forms, different atmospheres and how they all work together to create an immersive whole. I think when I talk about symphonic lieder it's really like I'm talking about symphonic form, not in the traditional sense of a classical symphony, but more in the sense of a through-composed, dynamic structure, rather than a song structure that tends to be repetitive.

The Knells is a concept album. What ties it together thematically or narratively?

There are some things that I have become really attached to thinking about as I've gotten older, such as time and perception and how quickly it seems to pass and how that's still so relative to the intensity of certain experiences. Watching all my friends get older and get married and have children, and watching members of my family get older in that way... darker things, like loneliness and angst and despair... I'm kind of a big outer space junkie—I love ideas about physics and I love reading about astrophysics—and don't get me wrong, I'm far from any sort of expert on that, but I love thinking about the cosmos, and how it provides a sort of frame of reference through which to view my own life. Those are a few of the themes that play into the record. I think each of the tunes can probably reference one of those things. I feel like, for whatever it's worth, the music and the lyrics are literally a snapshot of where I am in my life right now.

How does the project's title, and its association with death, relate to those themes?

The name of the project is taken from one of the songs, "Spiral Knells." There's a concept called Samsara which is part of the world of that song and which comes from Buddhist and Hindu philosophy: if Nirvana is a place of being and feeling enlightened and at peace with oneself and the universe, Samsara is the total opposite. It's a complicated concept and I don't wish to simplify it and make it sound trite, but it's essentially a state of mind wherein the posing of questions leads to nothing but more questions, more confusion, and ultimately a kind of spiritual death. I think it manifests itself in certain segments of our population in the form of depression, and probably a host of other mental disorders. And I'm not a Hindu or a Buddhist at all, but I've always found this idea really fascinating.