

An experiment in sound

Jim Casson on the inspiration behind another in his Dark Orchard series

BY SAMUEL PICCOLO
Special to the VOICE

One day, a couple of years ago, while trying to decide whether to produce a third album of his Dark Orchard experimental music, Jim Casson invited his great uncle Cecil Haist to the recording studio in the basement of his home.

Casson knew that Haist, who was his grandfather's brother and the last of his generation of the family, had some stories to tell. In particular, Casson wanted to know about the death of Haist's first wife, Del.

"I knew that he had married young, and that his wife had died shortly afterwards," said Casson, who is a professional drummer. "I asked him if he would tell me the whole story."

Haist did. "Once I had heard him describe what happened, it really affected me," said Casson. "I put it to a piece of sombre music I had been messing around with. When I listened to it, I had tears streaming down my face. I called my wife down to listen, and she was crying too. I looked at her and said, 'I guess I have something to say. I guess I have to do another Dark Orchard album.'"

That song, called "Cecil & Del," is the fourth track on Casson's record, "Tres." He released a video for it late last spring.

As Casson slaps a syncopated beat in the background of ambient tones, Haist recounts the story of his wife's death, and faded black and white photos of them fill the screen. There's Del reclining on a lawn.

"I met her, and we went out for a Sunday drive," says Haist. "I was awful shy and bashful in those days. When I was sitting the back with her, I was having an awful time making conversation."

There they are together, blurry on a beach. There's Del sticking her tongue out with a camera in hand.

"We got married in '49, in June. In October she got an attack of appendicitis. I drove her to St. Catharines hospital, they took her right in and said, 'We'll see you in half an hour.' So I went out and got a bite to eat. Then I went back to the hospital. The girl at the reception said, 'We've been looking for you.' I can remember this just as if it had happened yesterday. They came down and they said, 'We're sorry, but we lost your wife.' We'd been married for four months."

Last February, when Casson started mixing the album, he thought he'd like to have Haist over to listen to the completed song.

"But he died that morning," said Casson. "He never got to hear it."

Not all of the new music is so heavy.

"It's unmarketable," he said. "The goal is to try and create something different. A new thing. Something that's good for your soul, even if it doesn't sell."

Some of the songs emerged first as titled. Casson realized that the names of one of the greatest songwriting duos of all-time, The Beatles' Lennon and McCartney, were strikingly familiar to "Lenin and McCarthy," the Soviet bolshevik revolutionary and the rabidly anti-communist American senator.

"It's spoken word and ambient sound. Those guys are just yacking away in the background at the same time," said Casson.

Another song, "Bloor and Bathurst," is a Christmas story.

"It's a prose piece that I wrote about going to buy a Christmas tree with my daughter when she was one and we were living in Toronto."

Other songs on the album use words from people he has met while touring. Casson typically plays two or three drumming gigs a week in southern Ontario,



but has traveled across the country and in other parts of the world. "Donegal" is a song about the Troubles in Ireland.

"I didn't realize how bad things were until I was much older. That song is someone explaining to me what it was like to grow up during that time in Ireland."

Songs from the previous two Dark Orchard albums were picked up and played on CBC's The Signal, a now-discontinued evening show of often ethereal music.

"It was big on college radio stations too," said Casson. "Not that this means much, monetarily speaking. But that's not why you do it."

Not only is Dark Orchard a chance for him to play around with types of lyrics, Casson also makes use of obscure instruments.

"There's a thing called a 'vocoder.' It's used primarily by vocalists and keyboards—it's hooked

up so the keyboard harmonizes to the pitch of the vocals. It was big in the '80s, in songs like 'Video Killed the Radio Star.'"

Casson hooked up the program on his computer to his drum kit, something he says he's never heard done before.

"Each drum I hit, I got a different sound out of the program. So I improvised a silly drum solo, and took Charlie Chaplin's speech from 'The Great Dictator' and played it over top."

The end result, Casson said, is not only unmarketable, but also unperformable.

"It's not meant to be performed live. I did a show at the Niagara Jazz Festival, and one other where it was just me, and a trumpet player, with the videos projected behind us."

But Casson, who is kept busy by his own gigging, farming the cherries on his land, his role in

organizing the Fonthill Bandshell series, and in recording music for other artists, doesn't mind.

"I put the videos up online at darkorchard.ca, and I sell CDs at the Bandshell concerts," he said.

Even the cover of the album is reflective of Casson's intentions with the project. On the cover of the second record, he used a forklift to bring a piano up into the cherry orchard behind his house. This time, he dressed up with a drum on his head and sat in a red leather armchair with an assemblage of oddities around him.

"That painting is one of the first that my mom did. The lamp, the fan, the TV—all weird things," said Casson. "The point was to have stuff that is out of place."

Casson will perform live—and an entirely different genre of music—this Friday at Peter Piper's Pub, in Fonthill. "Jimmy's Juke Joint Blues" starts at 9 PM.

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