

Features



Lords of the Otherworld

PETER HAMMILL AND GARY LUCAS SUMMON IMAGINARY BEINGS
INTO AUDIBLE RANGE

BY BARRY CLEVELAND



PETER HAMMILL AND GARY LUCAS ARE BOTH MUSICAL nonconformists who have sustained successful careers for decades without compromising their artistic integrity.

Hammill is best known for his work with the seminal British progressive rock band Van der Graaf Generator, which formed in 1967, disbanded in 1978 after releasing eight epic albums, and then reformed unexpectedly in 2005, subsequently releasing four superb studio records and playing to ecstatic audiences around the world. In addition to his role as guitarist, keyboardist, vocalist, and lyricist for Van der Graaf, Hammill has released more than 35 solo albums since 1971 and worked with luminaries such as Robert Fripp, Peter Gabriel, Roger Eno, the Stranglers, and Kronos Quartet.

Drafted into Captain Beefheart's Magic Band in 1980, Gary Lucas appeared on two classic Beefheart albums and toured with the group for several years (he still occasionally helms a post-Beefheart Magic Band, and recently presented The World of Captain Beefheart, a concert in Amsterdam featuring a

60-piece orchestra and vocalist Nona Hendryx). Lucas' other credits include working with artists such as Jeff Buckley, Lou Reed, Nick Cave, the Future Sound of London, Chris Cornell, and Indian singer Najma Akhtar, in addition to releasing dozens of solo albums and recordings with his band Gods & Monsters. Lucas has also scored numerous major films and television programs.

All of the sounds on Hammill and Lucas' debut collaboration, *Other World* [Cherry Red], were produced with electric and acoustic guitars—albeit often morphed and mutated via Lucas' thaumaturgic manipulation of talismanic pedals and Hammill's deft mixing moves. The music comprises slightly ambiguous song-like structures infused with bits of blues and Americana, psychedelic instrumental soundscapes, and compelling hybrids of the two. Nine of the 14 tracks also feature Hammill's inimitable vocals and literate lyrics.

Hammill and Lucas performed their first show together in London earlier this year with more to follow.



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PETER HAMMILL AND GARY LUCAS



SEAN KELLY

What was the genesis of your collaboration?

Lucas: I've been a fan of Peter's work going back to 1969, when I purchased the first Van der Graaf album, *The Aerosol Grey Machine*. Three years later I was in England, where I saw him perform solo, and I actually interviewed him for a music magazine after the show. Then, after attending the amazing Van der Graaf Generator reunion at the Royal Festival Hall in London in 2005 I reached out to him via Twitter and he remembered me.

Hammill: Gary got in touch and just kind of threw out a line of "fancy doing something?" At first he was thinking of going to a studio somewhere in London because he had happened to be in Britain. I thought that might set up too much pressure, however, and since I have my studio here it seemed natural to suggest that he come down to my domain.

Was anything worked out when you began?

Hammill: There was never any discussion of what exactly we were going to aim for, or even of what our hopes would be—we just agreed to have a go at doing something. So, Gary rolled up here with his guitar and his array of effects and we set about it over a couple of days. He had prepared a few instrumental pieces that he thought I might be able to find something to do on top of, and those were more-or-less coherent song ideas. He also played some improvised soundscapes and sonic washes.

Lucas: In addition to my instrumentals, Peter had a few long loops and a song that was more finished, which I improvised along with. By the time I left we had a lot of music

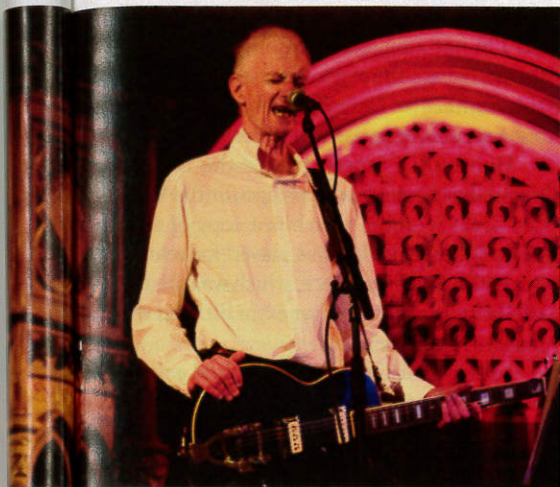
and he had his work cut out for him. I also came back four months later and did some brief overdubs on a couple of things.

Hammill: "Kith & Kin" is actually a tune that I wrote when I was 16 or 17, and a day before Gary arrived I thought, "Actually, that tune might work out in this context." So it just kind of popped up. It's not something I've been saving for years or denying for years. It just appeared again at that moment.

Was it always your intention for the album to be limited to guitar and vocals?

Hammill: Not really. That came along in the course of things. Obviously, I was living with this a lot longer than Gary was, because he had done his pieces, and I had to find what the lyrics were, what the top lines were, and come up with improvised responses to his playing. So, I got immersed in this world of two guitars and voice, and got very used to the idea, which became a definition in a way. In fact, I think there's a maximum of four guitars playing at any one time, with things just coming in and out in the mix. At its simplest, it's two aged blokes with guitars and a voice—basically back-porch blues stuff filtered through the rather strange lens of both of our experiences. Gary was keen at first to have some other instruments, but I think it adds even more strength for it just to be guitars and voice.

Lucas: Originally, I'd thought Peter might play some keyboards, and when I listened to a few of the early mixes I asked if we might add percussion to one or two of the tracks—but he really wanted to keep it just guitar and vocals, and basically he just went off and did what he wanted to do once the initial tracks



were recorded, which was fine with me.

There are shades of blues and Americana in Gary's playing, which fall outside of the usual musical vocabulary present on a Van der Graaf or Peter Hammill album.

Hammill: Quite so. There's no point in collaborating with someone if you're both coming in and doing exactly the same thing that you normally do. Otherwise, I'd just stick to my day job [laughs]. In this particular case I also find it interesting that the Americana stuff is pretty simple. I mean it might be complicated within itself—the little nuances may be complicated—but in terms of structure and shape, and compared to zipping around lots of time signatures and that sort of thing, it is quite simple. Obviously, I've ended up doing whatever it is that I do, but that's after 40 years of playing, and I began by writing simple songs as everybody does. So, in a way, doing this project reconnected me to my origins.

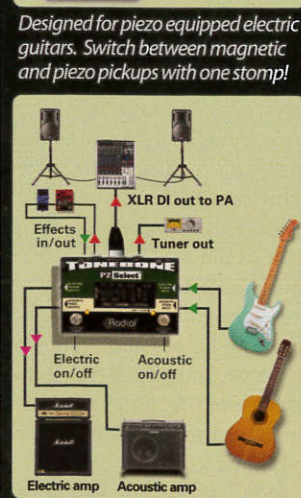
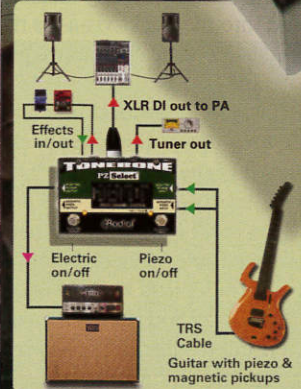
Given that you wrote the lyrics after the music was already recorded, did any of those idiomatic elements seep into your songwriting?

Hammill: It wasn't so much the Americana bit. We had a pretty intensive time those first couple days that we were recording, but of course we weren't just making music. We also chatted about this and that, and obviously we both have quite a few road years on us, so we discussed our shared and contrasting experiences of what life in music has been like and what it's been about. So, the fact that we had this intensive talk as well as the intensive playing resulted in some of the songs touching on those kinds of experiences.

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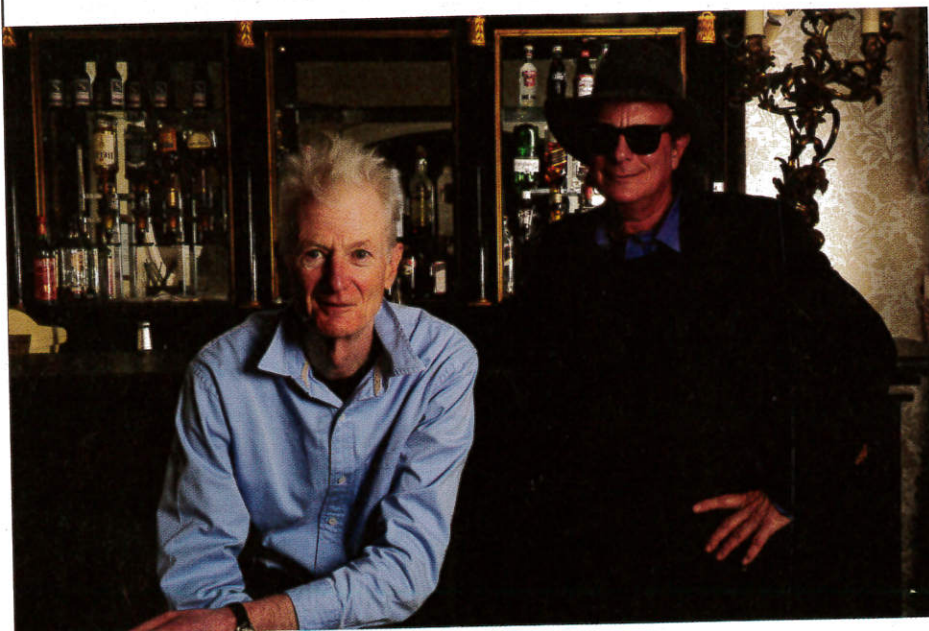
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For example, the title and basic themes for "This Is Showbiz" arose because that's something Captain Beefheart once said to Gary.

You said that there's a maximum of four guitar tracks playing at the same time. What percentage of the original performances are we hearing on the record, as opposed to edited performances?

Hammill: The only piece that's a bit complicated is "Black Ice," because it's obviously composed of different sections. With the written songs it's fairly obvious what is what, but in the sonic world there was typically a single part that we would begin with—in my case it might be a loop—and generally that original track would run all the way through, maybe drifting out and in here and there. And then we might add an extra color or two on the other tracks. In other words, it wasn't a case of, "Here's this bit, chop this out, drop in the other guitar," and what have you. It was very much an organic flow.

Did you record your parts separately or together or both?

Lucas: We were in the same room together while I was playing all my stuff down and I think that helped a lot.

Peter, you engineered and mixed the entire project?

Hammill: That's right.

Lucas: Peter and I discussed the mixes via email and sometimes by phone as he was doing them and I made suggestions.

For example, I kept pushing him to add more depth into the tracks vis-à-vis reverb sounds because I think that draws people in as a listener.

Gary, you have done a lot of film scoring. When you are improvising soundscapes, are you thinking cinematically?

Lucas: Absolutely. This goes back to when I was a boy. I loved cinema, particularly horror and science fiction films, and I used to get these little 8mm versions of some of the classics and put my own music to them. I think it's beautifully expressive to create soundscapes for the images one sees in one's mind.

Hammill: A lot of the material on the album is quite film-like in the sense that the way it flows, it's as if you're kind of drifting and then suddenly there's a bit of dialogue and then the piece goes off to something else. In the case of the pieces that began as atmospheric improvisations, I suppose most people would say, "Well, okay, that's an instrumental, so it doesn't need any vocals, and if there are going to be some, surely there should be verses and it should go a bit more than it actually does." But, actually, that's one of the things I found really interesting about the whole project: that it was possible just to stick in, say, 20 seconds of voice, and that's just another character.

What guitars did you play on the record?

Lucas: I brought a 1966 Fender Stratocaster, which is my main electric, and a

1946 Gibson J-45, which is my main acoustic. I'm not a big collector of guitars, and those two are the ones I'm most comfortable with. Peter had a bunch of gear there, but I chose not to use any of it.

Hammill: I mostly played the DeArmond that I got a few years ago for the Van der Graaf reunion, which is a copy of the Guild Bluesbirds that I've played for years, but with a Bigsby tailpiece, which was pretty useful on the record. That extra little bit of wobble is very helpful.

I also have a kind of bizarre hybrid guitar of my own invention. It's made up of various bits of Squier Stratocasters, but the strings are raised up high above the fretboard, making it a de facto lap-steel, and it also has a Hipshot Bender bridge, which lets you bend two strings to set intervals using a couple of levers, getting you sort of into the world of pedal-steel sounds.

I heard that sound and wondered what it was.

Hammill: It is quite unusual, isn't it? It's not a pedal-steel guitar, but it's not straight slide guitar either.

There are also some regular slide parts. Who played those?

Lucas: I played a few slide parts, using a glass Dunlop slide, though there are some places on the album where I'm not sure who's playing what [laughs]. One example of something that I definitely played with a slide is the choppy glissando part on "Some Kind of Fracas."

Did you use any amplifiers or record direct?

Lucas: I typically use a Roland JC-120 combined with some tube amps, but I didn't use any amps on this record. Peter had me going directly into the board and it sounded great.

Hammill: I use Native Instruments Guitar Rig a lot, and I believe that's what I had Gary playing through. I just set up clean sounds, as he obviously didn't need distortion or effects, given all of his pedals. I played through a Korg AX300G multi-effects unit that has some good Vox amp models and other sounds in it, which is also part of my basic setup in Van der Graaf. Beyond that, I added a few effects with outboard gear, including a really nice TC Electronic delay line.

Lucas: I've used pedals to develop a very specific vocabulary that's unique to me. I

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have quite a few vintage pedals and I brought some of them for the session.

There are lots of great delay effects on the record, including cool time smears and wild regeneration effects. What's responsible for those?

Hammill: Gary produced all those sounds using pedals of various sorts.

Lucas: Those sounds were probably made with my old Electro-Harmonix 16-Second Delay pedals. I have three of them, including one with a heavier chassis and more solid circuitry that was custom built for me by a guy who used to work for Mike Matthews. Supposedly, there were only 500 of the original units made, and they break down really easily. The reissued ones that came out a few years ago don't sound the same or function in the same way. Some of the sounds you described were made by recording different sections of a loop at different speeds and then changing the speed during the song.

What are a few of your other go-to pedals?

Lucas: The TC Electronic Hall of Fame reverb pedal is also fantastic, and I've used their Sustainer + Parametric Equalizer pedal for years. And I have a lot of old Boss pedals that I love, including a tremolo, a flanger, and a pitch shifter. At one point I was taking 22 pedals out on the road, but I've only got about half that many now.

There's a very synth-like voice on the opening track, "Spinning Coins." What's going on there?

Lucas: I'm using a Boss volume pedal into

a delay with lots of feedback and the delay volume set higher than the original guitar sound, which gives me some great surges that are very keyboard-like, or even orchestral sounding. Of course, a lot of any guitar sound is the result of touch. You could have all the pedals in the world, but it's your own touch and approach to the guitar that really give you your individual sound. Between my left-hand vibrato and my right-hand tremolo bar work, I get a very expressive sound, almost like a human voice.

Hammill: That song is also one the most back-porch-like on the record, as we are both playing acoustic guitars together. That's one of Gary's pieces, and he had recorded his original part while he was in my studio. When I came to play my part, I didn't examine what the chord shapes were or what the structure was at all before I started playing—so although by that time Gary was on the other side of the Atlantic, in a sense we were actually playing together and I was responding to his playing

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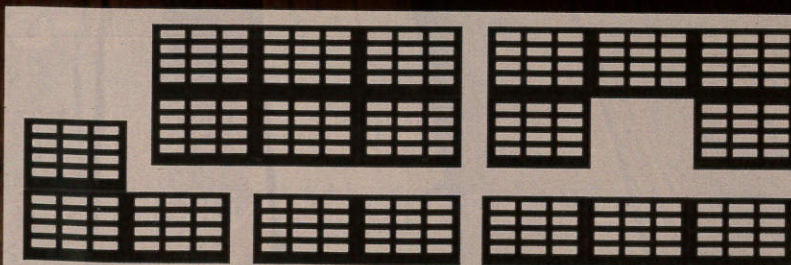
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immediately, much in the same way one would do live. That was pretty much the philosophy throughout. Neither of us looked for an overly considered or perfect part.

Lucas: Also, my acoustic part on that tune was played in open-*E_b* tuning, though when we played it live we did it in standard tuning.

Did you use open tuning on any of the other songs?

Lucas: I think for "Some Kind of Fracas" and "Built from Scratch" I was in dropped *D*, and on "Attar of Roses" I think I'm in *D* modal or *DADGAD*. There were others, but as my late father used to advise me, "A magician never reveals his secrets."

Speaking of "Some Kind of Fracas," what's making that huge, choppy modulation sound on that tune?

Lucas: I think that's just my Boss tremolo pedal set to extreme, and there may also be fuzz and an octave pedal on that track. Of course, a lot of what I do is hands on, painting the sound with the gear by manipulating parameters on the fly. That's why I've never used rack setups or pedals with presets, because part of the joy for me is to spontaneously create sort of oceanic surges of sounds. I still surprise myself with various combinations of sounds, but I've mastered the process of building them up and then bringing them back down to nothing. The combinations are like worlds within worlds of sound—and then they disappear. They're very ephemeral. It's a beautiful thing.

Did you also use any unusual playing techniques?

Lucas: Nothing unusual. I used the flesh of my fingertips, and sometimes also a little Dunlop Jazz III pick. When I was playing with Captain Beefheart I developed a fingerpicking technique using all of my fingers, because he would compose music on a piano and then ask me to play it on guitar. I had to figure out the notes and then voice them over six strings, which really stretched my technique—and my tendons, as well [laughs]. I did bring an EBow to the sessions, though I don't think I used it. Peter used one on a couple of tracks, though.

Hammill: I actually used it quite a bit on "Fracas," as well as on some other pieces.

There is some dramatic sound design on the album. How much of that took place in front of the recorder, and how much was done afterward when you were mixing and putting things together?

Hammill: Nearly all of it was done going

in. Gary's stuff is created with his array of sorcerer's pedals and it comes as it comes. I use a more restricted palette in terms of effects, basically just long delays and loops, and bits of modulation and short delays—nothing much more extreme than that. And the post stuff was fundamentally just reverbs and maybe a little bit of delay here and there, but definitely not completely altering the entire shape of things. And it's evident in fact because when we performed live with just two guitars as opposed to four it sounded pretty much like the record.

Were there any particularly memorable instances of happy accidents as you were recording?

Hammill: Doing improvisational music is often kind of funny and serious at the same time, and there were lots of bits like that. I was particularly happy to record the sound of the fountain in my garden, which I did late at night when there was no traffic noise, and use that as an ambient texture.

Lucas: I was particularly happy about some of the sounds on "Fracas" and "Black Ice." The guitar on the latter sounds really huge and demonic, and there are also the distorted radio voices, which worked well. I was thinking of "I Am the Walrus," when you hear the voice of King Lear or whatever it is, and Peter liked the idea. But I'm really happy with my guitar playing on the album overall, because I think it shows off my freakier psychedelic side to the max. The playing field was wide open, and because even the written parts of the music were fairly random, there were really no parameters in place that I had to conform to.

Hammill: While Gary was tracking his parts, I was engineering and therefore being more of a technical boffin than the enthusiastic partner attempting to vibe him up as a performer, or paying much attention to the actual performances. But once a track was completed we'd often look at each other and say, "Yeah, that's great. That really works out in the song."

Lucas: I'm very proud to be working with Peter. I think we made a brilliant record and I'd love people to hear it because it doesn't sound like anything else out there and it might open some minds. It's not so way out that it's like angry alienating noise. It draws people in, even when it gets freaky, as it does at points. I'm all about trying to meet audiences halfway, but they have to be willing to dare to listen to something new—and in this case, something really new! 🎸

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