



hat is this?" ponders Peter Hammill, considering his new album with Gary Lucas. "It's other-worldly. It's not straight down the middle; it's File Under Other. Which is something that I've always been, and hope to remain to my grave. I hope to always be in the 'others' category, as opposed to 'stick me in a box'."

"Listen," urges Gary Lucas, "he's got one of the great, distinctive English voices, right up there with Syd Barrett. And I've always been a total Anglophile, enamoured of the great English psychedelic music since the late 60s, where you take risks and expand the vocabulary of music beyond pop. I think this has an ageless feel to it. If you didn't reveal our identities and played it for a kid just getting into music, they'd go: 'Oh god, it doesn't sound like anything out there!' Plus the performances are real hot."

"There is still stuff to be done with just two guitars and a voice that has not been done a million times before," adds Hammill. "There genuinely isn't a category for this. It's an alternate universe."

pbeat, enthusiastic and talking across each other in a North London hotel, Hammill and Lucas are an odd couple who found even terrain on which to blend their idiosyncratic talents. Hammill, the

Englishman, is polite, reasoned, articulate. Lucas, the American, is fuelled with gusto and prone to entertaining tangents. Their album, Other World, is more than a meeting of transatlantic contrasts: it pairs one of Britain's most enduringly charismatic vocalists with one of the world's most inspired re-inventors of guitar sound.

Their histories are hallowed music lore. Peter Hammill's career as both a solo artist and key member of Van der Graaf Generator has provided some of the most haunting, unconventionally thrilling moments in rock history, while Gary Lucas has collaborated crucially with many legends, notably Captain Beefheart and Jeff Buckley. The result of their at-first spontaneous sessions in Hammill's Bath studio, then honed by the Van der Graaf man, is a mix of tense, delicate songs, and storms and washes of atmosphere.

The pair tell us that there were "a couple of days" of actually playing together, before Lucas left Hammill to work on the vocals and lyrics. When Lucas heard the results, he says he was "happy and amazed at what he came up with".

Hammill explains: "We had this window. Originally Gary suggested going into a studio in London, but I thought maybe that was too much pressure. It'd be easier to play in my studio, where obviously I know everything. To Gary's credit, he came prepped with stuff."

He imitates Lucas's garrulousness: "Here's a tune! Here's another tune! Okay, let me make a soundscape now! Okay, here's another one!"

Hammill had prepared a couple of things himself too, "but generally the first impetus was Gary's vision that this might work".

Lucas was, by his own admission, a fan. "He was the best live artist I saw when I first came to London in '73. He really made an impression on me. I interviewed him as I was a journalist for a bit, and somewhere in a box in my basement I still have the tape! Then in 2005 I was invited to the Van der Graaf reunion show and it was amazing. I'd been to the Cream reunion around that period, and Brian Wilson's Smile show, and I myself had been in The Magic Band reunion, but this Van der Graaf show was the outstanding one of all of them. I offered Peter an appreciation on Facebook or Twitter or something, and soon forces were at work to bring us together."

When Lucas did get the train to Bath, it was the first time the two men, despite corresponding online, had met in person for 40 years. Lucas plugged in his guitar and it didn't work, but then he kicked it and it did. An auspicious start. "We were on to something right away," he chuckles.

"There was no grand plan," muses Hammill. "We said we'd give it a go. In the way of these things, if you end up with a song, that's two

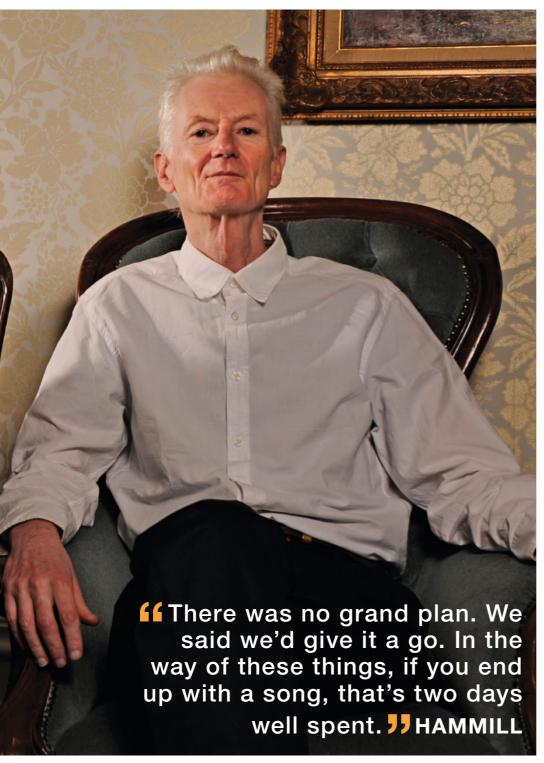


about both (at one point, Hammill

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would point out that Beefheart was using ideally you're living and breathing it, 10 fingers on piano which his six strings and want to get it out in the world. I like to share!" on guitar couldn't emulate, only to be told, "Well, find another four then." aving shared to great "You really had to stretch to achieve what effect with Beefheart and most people would think of as impossible," Buckley, Lucas, quite the Lucas says, summing up his steep learning raconteur, has plenty of anecdotes

curve with the erratic legend. "Now I have a record of film music out, with arrangements



I could only have worked up because of my training with Don."

"See?" laughs Hammill. "I'm meant to be the spiky guy, right? But I'm a doddle!" "Yeah," drawls Lucas, "he's a sweetheart."

Lucas, also serving as Don's unofficial manager for a while, helped him get established with a gallery once he'd decided to forsake music for painting. "Not that anybody could manage him. But I learned so much in five years with him."

Lucas quit briefly, "bereft", but over time was lured into sessions with everyone from Adrian Sherwood to The Woodentops to Matthew Sweet. He soon appeared on a wonderful dance crossover album by Wild Rumpus, playing with long-time friend Colleen Murphy (DJ Cosmo, also

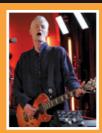
the founder of Classic Album Sundays). Of course, it's his work with the late Jeff Buckley that remains best known. "That was bigger than anything I ever imagined," he says.

Lucas was sending Buckley music in LA; the singer came to New York with lyrics and melodies. "He was so gifted. I could feel this electricity. My wife and I took care of him, encouraged and coddled him, brought him up to his full capacity. You gotta read my new book, *Touched By Grace*. I'd feed him records, mentor him. I'm a giving kind of person!"

At a wry smile from Hammill, he adds: "Ah, but here, Peter was the master, I was the pupil. Some of the things we've done here are as good as any collaboration I did with anybody, including Jeff. He has more experience. Those first Van der Graaf albums... oh man."

PETER HAMMILL

The veteran of both the prog and punk scenes, still regenerating.



'In our own small way," says living legend Peter Hammill, "we're striking out there with this. It doesn't sound English or American. It's not world music. It's other-world music. It's strange, but powerful."

been unique, with Van der Graaf Generator (whose debut album was in fact a Hammill solo album released under the band name) nevertheless once so big in Italy that they couldn' walk down the street. With over 30 solo albums under his belt (2012's *Consequences* being the latest), Hammill has hopped between diverse styles – from electronica to operatics to acoustic balladry – rigorously and restlessly.

Van der Graaf were often labelled prog, but Hammill became a prophet of punk rock with 1975's *Nadir's Big Chance*. Two years after its release, John Lydon said, "Peter Hammill's a true great, a true original. The credit he deserves just has not been given to him. Howe all his stuff."

Hammill suffered a heart attack in 2003, less than two days after completing his album *Incoherence*. His lyrics persistently address the big topics: life, mortality, time. He's looking forward to playing live with Lucas, and says, "Fun is more important than success when you're old guys. Fun while doing something serious, that is." CR

an der Graaf Generator's still-unique early offerings like *The Least We Can Do Is Wave To Each Other* and *Pawn Hearts* are prog touchstones. Along with Hammill's many solo albums since, they have been acclaimed by everyone from David Bowie to John Lydon. The band reformed in 2005, so has that turn of events coloured or shifted Hammill's own work?

"Van der Graaf's world is kind of different," he muses. "On the one hand, we've now made several albums in the modern era. Which obviously are Van der Graaf albums, but are not the same as the old stuff. Simultaneously, just the three of us now, we've reimagined things like *Lighthouse Keepers*, which we never played in the old days. Maybe we're being responsible musicians there now, though with a sense of fun.

"We're not trying to pretend we're these 21 or 22-year-old young Turks, golden of hair and body, striding forth to Olympus. It has had 100 per cent beneficial effects on my musical and personal life; an unremittingly positive experience. Emotionally and spiritually too. And in terms of a continuum, it informs my own work. Everything leads on to the next thing. It's all part of the same warp and weft."

Other World touches on themes of time passing, and there's a subsection of songs dealing with a young man who rises to music biz fame but is broken by the pressures at the top. Would it be crass to read anything autobiographical into the lyrics?





"Well, there's that little mini-opera about time. And Gary and I had chatted away about our shared but different life experiences of playing music, so there was an organic growth of subject matter. But myself, I never reached that apogee of stardom whereby I might fall into that path described, though I know enough about it. We've both seen it happen. Actually, I'm very glad I haven't had that degree of stardom because I'm still capable of doing work at this stage of life which I wouldn't be able to do if I'd had greater success in the past."

"You'd be expected to repeat a formula, keep the hits coming," interjects Gary.

"Exactly. Then people become dependent on you for their livelihood. Therefore, the last thing they want you to do is anything different. When you're young and successful it's very hard, when you're being told you're marvellous, to resist that. The fundamental thing for me is not to do something that's like the last thing I did. Even before the project with Gary, I had this strange, double-edged swing. For three months of the year I'm a member of Van der Graaf Generator. Then I have this so-called solo career continuing.

GARY LUCAS

From Hammill fan to wingman in four decades.



A Yale graduate, born in Syracuse, New York, Gary Lucas has been hailed as one of the most innovative living guitarists. He's played and collaborated with a veritable who's who of modern culture, from Leonard Bernstein, Lou Reed. John Cale and Iggy

Reed, John Cale and Iggy Pop to Allen Ginsberg, Damo Suzuki, The Future Sound Of London and Van Dyke Parks, while a new album with Wild Rumpus is imminent.

In 1990, Jeff Buckley joined Lucas's psychedelic band Gods And Monsters for a year, and co-wrote *Grace* and *Mojo Pin* with him. Lucas has scored films and TV shows, and in his youth played with Captain Beefheart's Magic Band for five years, ever managing Beefheart for a while.

He describes himself as "a teenage Anglophile' who was "partial to progressive sounds from the UK – music to my ears in the staid and moribund climate of Syracuse"

He bought Van der Graaf Generator's *The Aerosol Grey Machine* "solely on the cover art - a mysterious album which I fell in love with and played to death". In 1973, on his first trip overseas (with the Yale Symphony Orchestra), he travelled to Aylesbury to see a Peter Hammill gig. The set was "hypnotic, stark, doom-laden... and that incredible other-worldly voice. I interviewed him backstage and found him

A mere 40 years on, the friendship bears frui

I like to jump from one to another. And I try not to come to anything with too many preconceptions. If something feels right and *is* right, it should be done."

Your highly distinctive voice, or your several voices, are the continuous thread...

"All of which sound completely normal to me, and always have done!"

Do you consciously adopt a certain voice for each song, or does it just happen?

"It's a question of character, basically," says Hammill. "If a song has been written correctly, there's a character present. That character has to be inhabited like an actor inhabits one onstage. I'm talking about this as if I know what I'm doing, but I do it entirely instinctively when approaching a song. With a twinkle in the eye. Some may regard me as a rather bombastic character, but I like to think I've got a measure of self-awareness. I know when I'm winking and when I'm being serious! All that has to do with the voice."

An eerie and compelling fusion of two far-out talents, *Other World*, reckons Gary, will "astonish people. I want to take them on trips to a different reality."

Hammill adds, "The best double-acts—Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Morecambe and Wise—aren't similar. They're chalk and cheese, and so you end up with something more. So obviously *Bring Me Sunshine* will be our first single!"

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Other World is out now via Esoteric Antenna. www.esotericrecordings.com for info.

The best double acts, like Morecambe and Wise, aren't similar – they're chalk and cheese, and so you end up with something more. So obviously Bring Me Sunshine will be our first single! >> HAMMILL

