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R.A.G. ⚡ · Jul 15 · 6 min read

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN GRAFF





Martin Graff Trips for Piano

An album released from pianist Martin Graff is a gorgeous and empowering set of pieces that each embark on a different journey and with the new territory comes new emotional drive, new textures, and new layers of dynamic melody and performance that all come with a sheen that feels like, after only a few songs, becomes a part of you.

The *Trips for Piano* album is a delightful and warming set of works that have the ability to take you to different parts of your mind. Songs can bring up memories of your own. They can make you think, make you feel, and make you wonder.

The range of emotional drive and cinematic undertones are like chapters from a book or scenes from a film if you may. It's not difficult to get washed away with sections or get engulfed by entire pieces.

The performance of these songs is outstanding and between that and the actual arrangements, changes in progressions, and songwriting as a whole, this record can take hold of you in so many ways. And this is a good thing. It feels great to let go and let the music do its thing.

Everything about this has heart, soul, and character. It's performed with a gracefulness and subtlety that lets Graff really shine as a performer and as a songwriter.

This would be great to see live. But in the meantime, we have this extraordinary album and with its release, we wanted to talk with Graff about how it all came to be.

Here's what happened...

RAG: Okay so let's start with the Tips for Piano album. This record has a great cinematic quality to it. Where did this album come from?

It came from the center of my soul, which is made from my entire schema of existence. That's lofty, I realize, so let me bring it down to earth: I draw from everything I have experienced that strikes me as a noteworthy theme to express in musical tones. I exclusively write instrumental piano pieces, but—even without lyrics and using just one instrument—I have built affecting and articulate compositions about light, loss, beauty, meditation, imagination, chemical journeys, loved ones, the natural world, and sonority itself. The piano is the most versatile of acoustic instruments, capable on its own of fully realizing innumerable musical ideas, given a composer-performer who knows how to get them out of the instrument.

RAG: I'm hearing some great styles on this album. Who are some of your biggest musical influences?

I am more eclectic as a listener than a composer. I listen to all kinds of music from all over the world from all different time periods. Then, when I compose, I write for one specific instrument in a unique style that I have developed, which is (indirectly) influenced, to varying degrees, by all that stuff.

In the early years, during the mid-70s, my parents spun records by J.S. Bach, The Beatles, George Harrison, Bob Seger, Elton John, Keith Jarrett, and Erroll Garner, each of which captured my attention in its own way. In middle school, FM radio and MTV steered me toward new wave acts like U2, The Simple Minds, Billy Idol, and The Cure. Then, thanks to my edgier friends and classmates, high school marked a transition into punk rock and hardcore with The Dead Kennedys, The Dead Milkmen, Bad Brains, The Descendents, D.R.I., Minor Threat, The Circle Jerks, and early Napalm Death.

I did my bachelor's degree in music composition and classical piano performance, so my college-era tastes exploded to include the art music of Steve Reich, Arvo Pärt, Gustav Mahler, Claude Debussy, Charles Ives, John Cage, and Conlon Nancarrow, among many others. During this phase, I also got into more indie rock, progressive rock, electronica, rap, and world music through Unrest, The Posies, Brian Jonestown Massacre, The Dandy Warhols, Porcupine Tree, The Orb, The Streets, and Huun-Huur Tu.

RAG: So how did this all begin for you really? When did you fall in love with making music?

I started playing the piano spontaneously at age four when we inherited an old, anonymous, upright piano. I wasn't very good initially, but I had instinct and an amazing ear, which carried me all the way to age thirteen, when I finally started lessons. The value of lessons, or course, is literacy. Just like a written storytelling tradition enables heightened awareness and control of the material (versus the limitations of memory in an oral tradition), being able to read and write music notation was a key unlocking my full creative and technical potential. With that in mind, I did my bachelor's degree at Penn State University in music composition and classical piano performance.

Ironically, essential as my education was in making me a better artist, it also completely burned me out on music for a time, and it took a full seventeen years for me to return. (Really, I think the burnout would have happened with anything I professionally studied during my early-20s, as my personality then was just too intense to understand work-life balance and pacing myself.) That said, when I finally returned to music in 2015, I found that all of that education was still right there in my mind and hands just waiting to be accessed. In fact, I was able to compose and play with more joy and fluency than I had toward the end of my degree program.

RAG: What's next for you as an artist?

I already have a piece-and-a-half composed toward my next album, Trips for Piano 2, which will also be a set of solo piano pieces, this time around some different themes than in the first collection, as well as some variations on those same themes. The phrase "trips for piano" precisely encompasses the nature of what I do, so I plan to keep it as the overarching label for my ongoing travels in writing and playing music.

RAG: What inspires you to write a piece?

As I mentioned earlier, most anything can be inspiration for me, so here I'll talk a little about the flow of my creative process. Once I have an inspiring theme—changing shades of light, for example—I come up with a title and tagline for the piece to guide me the rest of the way (like "Prism: Shifting light in this shifting life," the first track on the album). And that's before I have written a single musical note. Next, I type out a Microsoft Word document where I describe the general and specific qualities that I want the eventual music to have based on its title and tagline, aspects such as modality, harmony, dynamics, texture, length, and overall proportional form. Finally, with all that guidance, I start mentally, then physically, composing the piece. Music without words can get so abstract that it becomes aimless without a thematic anchor and descriptive calculation to drive my creative decisions.

RAG: What are you doing when you're NOT working on music?

Trips for Piano ties into a larger stage show I do called The Face Zone: Surreal Daydreams to Trip your Imagination... It's a multimedia spoken-word act of poetic-prose vignettes with matching illustrations about every topic from the stigma of liking scrapple to the meaning of life. What connects the pieces is that they each start with a projected image of a face—human, animal, alien, abstract—to prompt reaction and thought, and to act as a catalyst for the material that follows. At a few points during the set, I punctuate the speaking by performing pieces from Trips for Piano, which gives the audience some space to reflect and take another sort of journey before the art and words return. The affecting commentary, original humor, whimsical artwork, and absorbing piano offer a uniquely engaging respite that cuts through the noise of our information-age lives with concise, essential truths certain to entertain as they set mind in motion.

In short, when I'm not working on the piano, I'm working on art, writing, and preparation for my larger act. All the while, I have also been an English as a Second Language teacher for the past 20 years, first at Penn State University during graduate school, then in China, then in Maryland, and finally now in Northern Virginia. I... am... busy.

RAG: Who are you listening to right now?

Recently, I've been into Tame Impala, Lil Peep, the new Porcupine Tree album, and "Love is Trying to Get a Hold of Me&" by Tavasco, a rare soul group from the late-70s.

RAG: Are you doing live performances?

I am always looking for gigs to vibrate more eardrums in new live spaces! This spring I was the featured artist at Busboys and Poets, The Woolly Mammoth Theatre, and Takoma Radio, all in the DMV area. My next scheduled performance is at The Athenaeum in Alexandria, Virginia on November 12th.

RAG: This release seems like a big undertaking. What kind of advice might you have for other up and coming artists out there?

Whatever medium you work in—art, writing, music, dance, film—know a lot of work in that medium, be hard to impress, and—when you do your own work—just try to impress yourself. And be prepared to make your art your lifestyle, as there is no fast track to quality content, nor in getting it out to the wider public. Even “overnight” successes come after a track record of sustained, disciplined effort.

RAG: Before we go, what would you like to say to fans of the music?

My greatest spiritual mission is to get this material to as many people as possible in the service of raising their spirits, triggering their imagination, and moving their soul. So, if it does that for you upon listening, please share it with as many others as you can.

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