

PURPOSING THE AIR – Artist’s Statement

I grew up in a literary household with parents who paid close attention to the written word. My father was a Goethe scholar, and my mother often read to us, pointing out the beauty of the sound of words. I have always felt an affinity for poetry. I appreciate its emotional power to move us and to make us think less literally.

Miles Davis stressed the importance of knowing the lyrics to standards, and I’ve always believed that understanding the meaning of the words provides an added dimension when improvising over them.

In my formative years as a musician in London, my first band was Nóis 4, a collaboration that included Brazilian singer Mônica Vasconcelos. We played original songs as well as our arrangements of works by Brazilian masters. Mônica is a journalist and a great lyricist in her own right, and she only sang songs whose lyrics she loved. We often discussed the meaning of the words, and I learned Portuguese to delve deeper into the music.

I prefer playing original music by living composers and composing for musicians I know personally. When choosing the text for this project, I decided to follow the same approach. I met Erica Hunt at a party in 2019, and we had a fascinating conversation about her poetry. So her work immediately came to mind when I started looking for a text for this project. The poem, “Mood Librarian - a poem in koan” in Erica’s collection *Jump the Clock* stood out to me. It’s a collection of sixty micro poetic fragments—cryptic, intuitively relatable, sometimes funny, and, true to the nature of koans, open-ended.

I began setting the words to music in February 2021 as part of a master’s degree in composition. The first duo I composed for was Duo Cortona: mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway and violinist Ari Streisfeld. I initially found this instrumentation daunting, as I thought the limited low range and polyphonic possibilities would be a challenge. However, I discovered that the violin has nearly limitless orchestration potential, and working with musicians of Rachel’s and Ari’s caliber revealed rich possibilities. Once I had composed a handful of pieces for Duo Cortona, the seed for the rest of the album was planted.

Apart from Rachel and Ari, I knew all the other musicians on this record before embarking on this journey. I have worked with Sara Serpa on two of her projects and love the purity and unpretentiousness of her voice. Out of the four singers, her voice is closest to mine, which made the compositional process quite natural, as I could sing her songs myself. Matt Mitchell is a pianist with razor-sharp time and he can play polyrhythms with the degree of accuracy and ease I needed for some of the songs. I heard Sara and Matt perform a duet as part of Sara’s group *Intimate Strangers*, and I knew I wanted them to be one of the duos.

I have long been a fan of Theo Bleckmann and Ben Monder's partnership, as well as of their work as individual artists. Their duo music is refined and deep, with a dark edge. In 2021, I played opposite them on a double bill. Listening to their set prompted me to reach out to them soon after.

Fay Victor and I have worked together on several occasions. In 2023, we performed with Patricia Brennan as part of double bassist Mark Dresser's and trombonist Michael Dessen's bi-coastal Telematic Project: Widening the Embrace. We all brought in arrangements of our tunes, and as I was working on Erica's koans at the time, I arranged three of them for this larger group. I loved what Fay brought to the pieces, and as her voice and delivery is also closest to the poet's own, the choice felt right.

Mariel Roberts and I first worked together when she was part of Mivos Quartet and Bojan Vuletić invited me to be a guest soloist for his composition "Recomposing Art VI: Guernica". We have since performed together in projects such as Nate Wooley's Mutual Aid Music and with the Wet Ink Ensemble. I featured her in my composition "Fight Flight Freeze" for Wet Ink. Mariel is a virtuoso contemporary classical cellist and a profound improviser. Fay and Mariel were the only duo of the four that hadn't played together before, but they seemed to have an immediate understanding of each other's approaches.

The poem's title, "Mood Librarian" aptly describes my compositional process for this project. Writing anywhere and everywhere, it took me three years to complete this song cycle. Composing the music became like writing a travel journal or diary, influenced by fluid and malleable circumstances. The margins of my printed copy are packed with scribbled notes such as: 22 — Distortion of time: from short and spacious to languid, a sense of reversal; 18 — Spacious! Information overload—make room for original thought; 46 — tender: harmonics, grace notes, pedal tones, movement in melody; 5 — Violence/domination—squeeze strings together with left hand and violently bow with right.

Still confined by the pandemic in 2021, I composed the first dozen songs at home. This changed when we were able to travel again. Looking through my notes: I wrote four at an artist residency at Ragdale House near Chicago, and two more in Ucross, Wyoming, where temperatures sank to -24 degrees Fahrenheit and I had only bison, eagles, and deer for company. Four more were composed at Sylvie Courvoisier's house while cat-sitting. I wrote three on off days in Vienna, and three more during a winter hurricane in January 2023, trapped in the concert hall in far-north Bodø, Norway. Some of the songs for Theo and Ben were written at my mum's house in Münster, Germany, which is near where Theo grew up and Fay cut her teeth as a blues singer. I wrote while sitting in parks, while walking and while riding on trains, singing into my phone's voice memo. Feeling that something was missing during the previous day's final rehearsal, I penned the very last slice of the last piece while on the way to Fay's and Mariel's recording session on June 7, 2024.

I assigned the poems to the duets guided usually by whose voice I heard in my head, rather than by instrumentation. While some choices changed, I usually had a clear idea of who sings which song from the outset. These selections were intuitive and quick, sometimes prompted by a single word or fragment, and in one case, a little tongue-in-cheek: after ecstasy, laundry had to go to the married-couple duet—Rachel and Ari. The words politic rage in reminded me of a conversation I had with Sara about her parents' political activism during Portugal's dictatorship years, as well as her own political activity. Sometimes, the sound of the words themselves prompted the assignment of a duet or a musical treatment. For example, the 'er' sound in the words verbs everywhere seemed a great vehicle for Theo's extraordinary overtone singing. Walking briskly, pulling each other by the hand suggested urgency and tight rhythm, as did the sun sprints across the year. The words open up restless brick and swallow evoked an electronically enhanced swallowing of words by Ben Monder's long-reverberating guitar sound and a treatment with Theo's loop setup. Catch the ball, and now I throw it suggested hocketing, where the singing and cello parts are never played simultaneously until the whole lyric is revealed. I use the natural speaking rhythm of the full line to create a rhythmic hook, while the cello part continues to wobble around it, occasionally syncing up rhythmically.

Broken glass suggested Fay's and Mariel's high-pitched, spiky improvisations. My idea for fit time to place, even the middle was for Rachel's and Ari's parts to share the same pitch, but in independent tempos, with extreme changes in tonal color on almost every note. The line is repeated three times, with each iteration speeding up, before both unify in the final phrase. Waiting to be worded careful required time to develop as a musical thought, whereas noisy ice as the mind races suggested the opposite — ice cracking under one's feet, the mind racing for a survival strategy.

Like most performer-composers, I tend to compose for ensembles that feature me as a performer. However, in the past five years, I have begun to compose for groups in which I don't play. When I began writing this music, I briefly considered either being a duet partner myself or transforming some of duets into trios, but I didn't hear saxophone on this record. It was refreshing to direct from a conductor's perspective, or as if I was in the audience. As a performer within a group, it's much harder to get an objective sense of what the music sounds like as a whole, since part of your attention is focused on playing your instrument.

The songs are discrete miniatures, each focusing on one or two ideas. Working with this self-imposed limitation helped focus my thinking. Although I had written a few songs during my Nóis 4 days, I'd never written this many songs before and had to dig deep for ideas. Working on this project for three years became a grounding factor in my life, which involves a lot of travel and constant movement. It was enriching to collaborate with singers from such varied backgrounds, and I often checked back with them to see how I could modify the songs to make them more rewarding to sing, and therefore more expressive. I wanted the music to feel like clouds floating in and out of a field of vision, and when my producer David Breskin (who's also a poet) suggested Purposing The Air as a possible album title—modifying a line from the penultimate koan on the record—it was a perfect fit.

For musical reasons, I reordered the poems from their original sequence in the book. The track numbers on the poster correspond to the order of the songs on the record.

I am grateful to Erica Hunt for allowing me to use her beautiful words, and I feel blessed that the musicians on this record embraced my music with so much energy, commitment, and love. Thank you to Isabel Breskin, Sylvie Courvoisier, Gregg Belisle-Chi, John Mallia and Roger Zahab. I also want to acknowledge the team behind me: none of the music could have been realized without the recording, editing, and mixing engineer Ryan Streber, a genius I trust completely; Charles Mueller, who stepped in for Ryan when he had Covid; Scott Hull, who breathed life into the recording during the mastering process; all eight amazing performers; Kris Davis and Pyroclastic Records for releasing it; and last but not least, co-producer David Breskin, who has supported my projects in ways I never imagined possible.

A special thank you to Tom Rainey, who may have had to listen to the music on this record one too many times and is an incredible source of strength in my life!

Ingrid Laubrock
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