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photography by michael wilson



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Twenty years in:

## An Interview with Over the Rhine's Linford Detweiler

by Elizabeth Sands Wise

I sat on a cold cement floor under stained glass windows, a wool jacket spread underneath me in lieu of the blanket I hadn't thought to bring. The cracking walls and makeshift stage were lit with tea lights and other candles. Assorted food, coffee, and wine, procured by volunteers, sat out on long tables in the back corner, and a hungry line snaked around the room as the concert began.

Young couples sat under blankets on the floor. Some had bleacher cushions. Some of the artsy sort were there in tattered corduroys and homemade scarves, with enormous camera lenses and dark-rimmed glasses. Others in the room were middle-aged and well-dressed, in khakis, turtlenecks, and diamond earrings.

This unexpected community shared an afternoon eating, drinking wine, huddled under the crumbling shell of the hundred-year-old St. Elizabeth's, home to a vibrant church community in Norwood, Ohio. It was a Eucharistic kind of experience. A surprise communion.

It was Over the Rhine's annual Sunday Soirée.

Linford Detweiler and Karin Bergquist, better known as Over the Rhine, began recording music together in 1989. Their lyrics infuse ordinary, lived experience with a can't-quite-put-your-finger-on-it sacramental something. They consistently manage to put aside the sacred/secular divide and find the beautiful within brokenness. It is this thoughtfulness—found on each of their more than twenty releases—that has earned the husband and wife duo a place on [recently-defunct] Paste Magazine's list of 100 Best Living Songwriters.

Based near Cincinnati, Over the Rhine has been making music for over twenty years, yet their albums continue to plow new ground lyrically and instrumentally. In 2007, they started their own record label, Great Speckled Dog, and this summer recorded a new album with famed producer Joe Henry. To fund the new album, Over the Rhine developed a "Let's Make a Record" plan and offered to partner with their fans, giving listeners an opportunity to get involved at various financial levels. (Smaller donations yielded donors an advance copy of the album, additional bonus tracks, and a few other thank

you's including "a small surprise when the CD ships;" the largest donation category promised a "private acoustic house concert," among numerous other personal gifts from the band.) Based on the strong and immediate response, their fans were thrilled to be part of the adventure.

I recently spoke with Detweiler on the phone from Nowhere Farm, the home he shares with Bergquist an hour outside of Cincinnati. We spoke about the new album, the sacramental side of Over the Rhine's music, the difficult discipline of being present, and how communities have shaped his songwriting.

**In one of the long letters your fans have grown to anticipate receiving from time to time, you recently said one of the reasons you keep making music is "presence." You talk about the passage when Jesus said, "if you help someone in need, someone hungry or naked or thirsty..." if you are able to be present with them and soothe them in some way—those are your words—"it's the same as if God was hungry or naked or thirsty or in prison, and you found a way to help God." How do you remain present to the music at hand? You've recorded so much, and you write so much, how do you continue to remain present?**

LD: The first way is just insistence on telling the truth and not faking something for the sake of finishing a song or a record. So first of all just being willing to sit with a song until something is revealed that feels real and honest and sort of connected to the people that we are. The scary thing is that doesn't necessarily happen overnight. It's been three years since we've released our last studio record, and there are songs on the new record that I know I wrestled with for every bit of that three-year time period, really waiting for that right thing to be revealed, when the song felt substantial and well-made and like a container of something I needed to learn. So I think it starts with creating space in your life to write, if you feel called to the vocation of writing. That's one of the steepest hurdles, just arranging and discovering a life that actually makes room for writing.

**When you think about this making space in your life, and the writing process as a whole, do you think of it in terms of discipline, then, rather than inspiration?**

LD: Yes. Inspiration is great, but fairly early as a writer, I wrote down "Inspiration comes afterwards." That is not an original thought, but writers put pen to paper, or they sit down at the keyboard, and they start wrestling with words, and that sort of needs to happen regardless of whether or not you're feeling inspired. That being said, I'll take any scrap of inspiration I come across, and I will be grateful for it [laughs].

I know one song on the record, 'Infamous Love Song,' was like that. I just happened to pick up Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and was just sort of reading that and just sort of getting a little bit

intoxicated with the language, and I put it away and went out on the porch swing and probably eighty percent of the song just spilled out. I had come across a line, "holy the bop apocalypse." And that line just started quivering and reverberating in my mind, and I started scribbling down lines, and then, you know, I took six months of really hard work to edit it down and get it the rest of the way home. But I had already been writing for a few hours before I picked up *Howl* and had that little bit of inspiration hit me, so I think it's more about putting in the hours.

**Some of your songs are playful and yet also seem to be timely, or somehow charged with—not necessarily something political or ethical—but something else, under the surface. "No Kill Shelter" from the new album comes to mind—it's fun, and you can just listen to it as a fun song, but you could also see it as pacifist, or just pro-compassion, empathy, and caring for the stranger. There's this other level to it. How do you see your role as a music-maker in the world?**

LD: Some of that comes down to craft, and being aware that most of the music that I'm drawn to, most of the songwriting, has various levels going on simultaneously, so I want to be open to that. The best metaphor for what you're talking about that I've heard was given to me by the poet Billy Collins. I heard him speak, and he talked about his poems and his approach to them being like an eye chart at the eye doctor. There's the big "E" sitting up on top that everybody can see. And then there's a second line where the print gets a little bit smaller but most people are still very much on board, and then the print gets a little smaller, and then it gets a little smaller still, and—Wow, as I'm saying this a beautiful blue heron is flying right over my head!—in my songs, I want a focus point in the song where everybody in the room can come together and share in that moment, without a great deal of effort. I try to be inclusive, but for those who want to go a little bit deeper, I want there to be layers that are available to those who are willing to look more closely.

**You have said, "When we stop believing we're doing our best work, we're done. Every song has to be good, every record has to be great, every concert has to have some spiritual significance—something that we can't quantify, something bigger than all of us." Rather than making a big proclamation of what is good or what is beautiful, you tend to tiptoe up to the good and the beautiful, as if you're discovering it, maybe, or you're unearthing it in this ordinary, lived experience. Do you see your music as a bearer of the sacramental imagination?**

LD: Well, first of all, in terms of whispering hope versus shouting from the mountaintops, you know, I'm much more interested in the former. I just doubt my ability to shout convincingly from the mountaintops. Yeah, one thing that happens on a fairly regular basis in our writing, I think, [is that] if I tend to cross a line over into making too many pronouncements, my wife (my partner and editor) will often say, "Why don't we rephrase that as a question?"



**Right. Questions rather than answers.**

LD: Yeah. For instance, in the last song on the new record, called 'All My Favorite People,' there was a line where I said, 'I see each wound you received as a burdensome gift. It gets so hard to lift yourself up off the ground.' And Karin was uncomfortable with 'I see each wound you've received as a burdensome gift.' She just took out two letters and made it, 'Is each wound you've received just a burdensome gift?' I thought it was so much more powerful. Because you're sort of just putting the question out there, like, at those most difficult moments, are they a gift of

the broken and the unbroken—we see that those divisions cannot be made. We're all broken, and it's all sacred. So that is sort of where we try to live. And if we fail, on a personal level, I think songs can remind us what we aspire to.

**I wanted to ask you about the e-mails that for years you've sent out to subscribing fans; some readers have called your e-mails works of art. Do you see them as just an outlet—a way to communicate information—or is there something more going on, maybe a sort of "housekeeping" work toward maintaining a community?**



some kind? I don't always know that. I'm willing to learn from you, 'what do you think,' you know? And that to me opens up a special place where real conversation can happen.

So I don't know. Take the unwillingness to divide the world into sacred and secular, or an unwillingness to divide the world into

LD: Hm. I like that. Well, first of all, as a songwriter, I've always tried to find excuses to secretly just be a writer! And so I'm a songwriter that has been scolded by critics for writing long liner notes! These "newsletters"—it's really just sort of a nonthreatening way for me to get to be a real writer [laughs]... I do write them as if I'm writing to extended family. It's a pretty

important component of what we do at this point, twenty years in. It's not uncommon for people to thank us for our music and for the letters [laughs]. Like they've almost become part of a whole somehow. In those letters, I'm really, really thinking out loud about what it is I care about, the little discoveries I've made, you know. I try again to write mostly from a place of celebrating the small victories. A place where I'm paying attention. I've resisted the urge to write when my head is overwhelmed with dark clouds, or if I feel like I'm losing my way. I've tried to make the letters a little bit more celebratory in nature, I guess. But yeah, I do put everything I can muster into those. And I do treat them as if they were real pieces of writing.

**In the letter that was announcing the "Let's Make a Record" plan of action, you said, "We believe that making music has something to do with what we were put on this earth to do. If we leave our songs alone, they call to us until we come back to where we belong. When we live in the sweet spot of that calling, it gives others permission to discover the sweet spot of your own calling and live there." I thought that was really beautiful, because it combines this idea of calling with the idea of relationships, or community. So I would like to take a few minutes to talk about communities of influence on you and your music. Is that okay?**

LD: Sure, absolutely.

**I guess the easiest way to start is to ask what music you and Karin were raised listening to.**

LD: Well, probably first and foremost, we both grew up around a lot of old gospel music and hymns, and church music, sacred music, so-called. And we both spent some pretty formative years in small coal towns near West Virginia, so there was a little bit of an Appalachian thing happening, with those traditions. We were hearing country and western music, and then the rock 'n roll that would happen on our friends' car stereos. It was just sort of—I think I wrote in the liner notes to Ohio that it was kind of this strange musical world where Elvis was king and Jesus was Lord. So yeah, we grew up with a pretty wide cross-section of American music.

But in terms of community, I would say the first most influential community on me was my family. Both of my parents were raised on Amish farms, and music was essentially forbidden in terms of musical instruments, except for the harmonica, and we're not sure why that exception was made. But I just buried my dad's last living brother—he passed away a little over a week ago—and as a child, he had hidden an acoustic guitar in the hay in the barn; he had hidden an accordion under the horse's manger. And there was this idea of forbidden music. I think that has been a huge influence on me, inheriting that part of my family's story, because it reminds me that songwriting ... there is something dangerous and subversive about it, and if I'm not risking anything as a writer I might be wasting people's time.

The other beautiful image as far as the community of my family is my mother wanting a piano as a child. She wasn't allowed to have a piano, so one of her school teachers helped her cut out a cardboard keyboard and bring it home to her bedroom, and she would play her cardboard keyboard and hear the music that was only inside of her. Forbidden music.

So sorting out some of that tradition, my dad turned down the family farm when he was 21. He left, began exploring, he eventually bought a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and he would make field recordings at night. He just loved what everything was doing at night, you know, at the edge of the swamp, on the edge of the woods. He began bringing records home, a very random eclectic mix of things that he discovered, everything from Harriet Jackson to early Eddie Arnold to southern gospel quartets; it was just very, very rich and very random. So I would start with my family, which is kind of a large community in and of itself. I have five siblings, my dad had seven siblings, my mother had eleven siblings.

**Over the Rhine is obviously named for a community of sorts as well, a neighborhood community in Cincinnati. What's the significance of that decision?**

LD: That was very influential as well. We started the band in sort of a bad part of town in Cincinnati, and it happens to be one of the most intact neighborhoods from the late 1800s in the world. And it was just sort of full of a kind of terrible beauty. We migrated down there after college; I had a third-story apartment overlooking Main Street. It was our first time living in a predominantly black neighborhood. I thought the children were so amazingly beautiful. The contradictions of America were just everywhere you looked—this European architecture combined with issues of poverty and gentrification, all of it was just kind of right there.

**What about your fans? You've been playing for over twenty years; you have baby boomers with diamonds sitting next to twenty-somethings in cut-off jeans. How has this diverse community influenced your music throughout the years?**

LD: Well, number one, they've certainly given it a life by listening to it and passing it around. They complete the circle and make it feel like a complete conversation. We love the fact that young kids continue to find the music. I think if that quits happening, you know, it's time to look at the expiration date. We're always excited when we play a show that's twenty-one and over, and we get people asking, 'Are you sure there's no way I can get in?' It's a huge compliment.

One of the most amazing stories that somebody told me, that speaks more to the power of song, really, than anything I've done, was that there was a woman in hospice, and there was a sign on the wall that said, 'DO NOT UNPLUG. FOR HOSPITAL USE ONLY.' And her family had unplugged that



cord, and plugged in a little stereo, and my friend said they were playing one of our records for her the day before she died. When we do songwriting workshops sometimes, this idea comes up of like, who are we writing for? And I always say, why not write for the person who is living their next-to-last day on earth. Why not write that song? And sort of swing for the fences—what would that song be? I'm interested in trying to write that song. I think our listeners have influenced us by being willing to go with us into whatever those dark, messy places are that feel honest.

You know, one of the first things that we did, having grown up in the church, was we took our music sort of out of the church and just put it in a physical place where people were listening to music, in any particular town, regardless of where that might be. That was a little bit radical when we started. For instance, if we played Cornerstone Festival—that was the only 'Christian' concert that we would play that year—and then we would get back to work and go back out to the general marketplace. I've always been interested in breaking down artificial barriers that divide us into camps, when we're really all part of the same family, even if it's a dysfunctional family.

**Well, I guess I'd like to end by talking about your new record again. How would you describe the album to people who don't know what you've done?**

LD: I would describe it as a little bit dark, cinematic, sea-faring. Those are just general words. We cut the whole record live, I mean, with everybody playing together. It really felt that we were hopping on a train or setting out to sea, and we had to occasionally hit the lifeboats, but we made it back, and the record is what happened.

**What sort of influence did [producer] Joe Henry have on the actual album?**

LD: I wanted to make a record that I couldn't imagine. And that happened. I wanted to, in Joe's words, "blow the seams out of the songs" in unexpected ways. That happened. Joe doesn't talk to the musicians about how the record is going to sound. He asks everybody to watch the same movie a few days before we start. It happened to be an old Italian film from the fifties, kind of grainy, black and white. And sure enough, it was gray and

rainy when we arrived Monday morning in Pasadena! And I was thinking, 'Wow, this guy really does make weather!'

Joe is a very gifted writer, frankly, and I think it might have been the first time I felt like we were really making a record with a

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writer. And there was a different level of communion that was happening. Joe co-wrote a song with us and then contributed a lyric to a melody that Karin had. It's that little melody at the end of the demos called 'Soon.' That was just one of the high points of the record, and it happened, like, before breakfast the day before we were done. It was just a real—I think the word I would use is communion—sort of a deep solidarity. It was the trip of a lifetime.

**Do you have a favorite track on the new album?**

LD: One of my immediate favorites would be that song that Joe wrote with Karin, 'Soon.' When you hear it, tell me if you don't close your eyes and just have this movie happen in front of your eyes. I think it's one of the high points. \*