

LETTERS FROM A FLYING MACHINE



PETER MULVEY

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Somewhere in the sky, on yet another flight to Dublin, or Anchorage, or any of the stops on his nearly constant tours, **Peter Mulvey** takes out a pencil and a piece of paper and begins another letter to one of his many nieces or nephews. "My first niece was born nine years ago, and on that very day I wrote her a letter," says Mulvey. "Over the years, I just kept it up, with her and with the other ones as they came along. At first I wasn't sure why I was writing letters to kids who couldn't even read yet, but pretty soon, I figured out that I was writing to their future selves; each letter is a kind of time capsule."

Four of these letters find their way onto *LETTERS FROM A FLYING MACHINE*. The album, Mulvey's twelfth, is largely a collection of songs, with the letters (read aloud, complete with the rumble of airplane engines and instrumental accompaniment) serving as a framing device. "This record is meant to be listened to all the way through" says Mulvey. "The songs and the stories work in a specific sequence, to allow me to get at my central topic: when all is said and done, what it is that lasts?"

The letters act as a thread, tying together a series of songs ranging from cunning character studies to pointed observations of human nature to haunting, bittersweet reflections on the passage of time; all pointing the listener towards his conclusion. "If there is a pattern to this record," Mulvey explains, "it's time-time-time-love. As a songwriter I've always been trying to address these two things: love and time. Love, which only happens in time. Trying to be here in each moment while letting each moment go. And I've found that addressing a new generation within a family casts that topic in a whole new light."

Letters also heralds a drastic change in Mulvey's process. "Most of my records take three days," he recalls. "This time, I was engaged in the process of making this record for three-and-half months. It was almost like painting, refining each part until I got it right, and then building another layer on top of it."

Richly acoustic, with a hint of rustic clatter befitting the album's themes of antiquity, obsolescence, and progress, *Letters* puts Mulvey's nimble guitar front and center, framing it with contributions from several key associates, including Paul Kochansky whose upright bass runs throughout. The album's music is more arranged, with Mulvey mapping out parts in advance of inviting in the musicians. "I wound up humming a lot of instrumental melody lines," he says, "imagining a cello part here, a clarinet there. In the end, we kept the humming and overlaid the instrument on top of it. It's a curious sound, as though I'm singing what I imagine, and then the imagination becomes real."

Improvisation still crept into the process, such as Chris Wagoner's unexpected mandolin vamp on "A Wing and a Prayer," or the quickly constructed string section on the sadly resilient "Shoulderbirds."

"Shoulderbirds" ushers in a quartet of songs that circle ever closer to Mulvey's final realization. "It all leads to something," says Mulvey. "'Bears,' one of the letters, deals with mortality in the abstract. Then the song 'Mailman' is very bluntly about mortality – the death of a friend's father- and transcendence: the coming of spring, the return of the blackbirds, a niece losing another tooth."

"Vlad the Astrophysicist" follows; the last and most staggering of the letters. "It's a true story," Mulvey says. "I met Vlad at my yearly gig at the National Youth Science Camp. The gig happens in a cave underneath West Virginia, and the Science Camp is an incredible story in itself, but the letter came from Vlad, who is a real-deal astrophysicist from the Czech Republic. We were sitting behind a motel drinking beer, looking up at the stars, and I figured hey - he's an astrophysicist, he might actually be able to tell me whether there's intelligent life out there. So I asked him, and he answered in plain English, and his answer floored me – it was the single most startling thing anyone has ever told me. So it had to go into one of the letters."

Mulvey follows Vlad's revelation with "On a Wing and Prayer," a song in which the singer, in the face of overwhelming awe, responsibility, and mortality, replies with a song of love and joy. As the song fades, we hear the rumble of the engines again, and then a distant-sounding recording of Mulvey, solo, playing George and Ira Gershwin's "Love Is Here to Stay" emerges - as if from the rubble. "What better song have we as a species got as an answer to mortality?" Mulvey asks. "It's the last tune the Gershwin brothers ever wrote - George wrote the melody just before he died, and then Ira completed it with the lyric. 'Our love is here to stay.' – what a profound response! People think profound songwriting began with Bob Dylan...but this song is an edifice – a serious edifice in American culture. Hopefully this entire record builds a little platform with a little arrow on it that says 'stand here.'" That's the angle I want people to hear the Gershwin song from."

"Our Love Is Here To Stay" is a song that everyone has heard, and yet Mulvey frames it in a way that gives it a haunting new resonance. It's a sensation that occurs, at different levels, throughout *Letters From a Flying Machine*, as common gestures and sights are reborn in the light of Mulvey's perspective. Even as grand universal truths are slowly brought into view, Mulvey grounds them in the small things we all experience – as detailed in the four letters that frame the album. "Of course," Mulvey says, smiling, "the actual letters to my actual nieces and nephews would not be as entertaining to an audience. They're much less universal, more personal – which is how it should be."

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