Arts & Humanities

Chord Curriculum

A musician-writer makes music to think by.

By
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Illustration by Riccardo Vecchio

It was the spring of 2015 and P. J. Sauerteig ’15CC was searching for a voice. One day, while he was sitting in Columbia philosophy professor Philip Kitcher’s class, Sauerteig’s ears perked up: Kitcher was reading aloud from *Ulysses*, his voice gliding through the labyrinth of James Joyce’s prose with mesmerizing clarity and direction.

Kitcher didn’t know it at the time, but he was auditioning for a speaking role on Sauerteig’s next indie album. The College senior had already put out three records under the name Slow Dakota, and now he was looking for someone to perform the spoken-word compositions on his fourth album. The professor’s voice left him spellbound.

“Hearing that man read *Ulysses* could wake the dead,” Sauerteig says.

Less than a year later, Sauerteig, now an alumnus, returned to campus, to the basement of Hamilton Hall, where he recorded Kitcher for *The Ascension of Slow Dakota*.

On the album’s opening track, Kitcher recites an allegory about a contest in which God judges original songs composed by angels. The narrator’s song does not win the contest, but he’s not disappointed, for he “received the greatest gift of all — a thoughtful listener.” The message is an appeal, and perhaps even a subtle heads-up: *The Ascension of Slow Dakota* is rigorous and requires your full attention. Sauerteig, who wrote that allegory and also contributes piano, ukulele, mandolin, and percussion to the baroque-pop mix, leads you on a melodic, sometimes hypnotic expedition through ballads, hymns, poems, and requiems filled with literary allusions, with nods to Joyce, Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf, and William Blake.

Sauerteig understands that his project makes demands on an audience. “I realize that at times the album is impenetrable and full of arcane references,” he says. “I’ve often asked myself, ‘Why on earth would anyone in this day and age put out this kind of music?’”

To arrive at something of an answer, one must look at the portrait of the artist as a young student. Sauerteig became steeped in the Columbia music scene as a freshman, playing piano at Orientation and starting an experimental-folk band with four classmates. He says he was “amazed — even embarrassed” by the wealth of musical talent surrounding him, and resolved to collaborate with his classmates as

much as possible. Indeed, when looking for a producer for *The Ascension of Slow Dakota*, Sauerteig called on classmate Sahil Ansari ’15SEAS, who had played in a “confessional avant-folk” band at Columbia called Tox and Guest.

Sauerteig’s lyrics are a direct reflection of his course of study at Columbia. He majored in creative writing with the explicit purpose of sharpening his Slow Dakota compositions. His studies with poet Joseph Fasano ’08SOA, who teaches graduate and undergraduate writing, made such an impression that Sauerteig asked Fasano to read the album’s closing poem. And Barnard English professor Margaret Vandenburg ’96GSAS, whose course on postmodern literature inspired many of the underlying themes of the album, reads a short allegory.

In contrast to the pristinely polished recordings of the album’s musical tracks, each faculty performance was recorded on an iPhone, an intentional decision by Sauerteig to imbue these quiet moments of reflection with a raw timelessness. Turn the volume up and you can hear echoes from the Columbia halls and the muffled murmurs of students passing by. These can only be detected if you listen carefully, of course. Fortunately, *The Ascension of Slow Dakota* is so musically and lyrically layered that one has no choice but to put all else aside and commit, for sixty-one minutes, to being a thoughtful listener, which may, in the end, be Sauerteig’s greatest gift of all.

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