As the epitome of a sensitive drummer, a bandleader, and a composer with a transcendent approach, **Gerry Hemingway** is an indispensable part of the jazz and improvisation scene. In this interview, the American, who has lived in Switzerland for years, cautiously reflects on his career.

By Manfred Papst

As the train arrives at Lucerne Station , Gerry Hemingway is already standing on the platform. You wouldn't guess that the drummer turned seventy in March 2025. Rather, the expression "fit as a fiddle" fits him. He is ~~not~~ only a passionate biker, but also swims long distances in Lake Lucerne every day.

An offer from the Hochschule Luzern brought him here in 2009, in the midst of a turbulent period in his life. What was initially intended as an interlude became a permanent solution.

We stop in front of a row of houses. .Hemingway lives on the fourth floor of a building with several therapy offices. Naturally, he takes the stairs, not the elevator. Before we sit down in the living room for the interview,
We spent a while in his hallway in front of walls with thousands of recordings of all kinds. The shelves of cassettes are particularly eye-catching . The drummer recorded them himself as a young man and meticulously labeled them in such tiny letters that one is almost reminded of the micrograms of Walter Benjamin and Robert Walser.

How did this collection come about? As a teenager, did you borrow and record every LP you could get your hands on?

First and foremost, I was a radio freak. In the 1960s and in the 1970s, radio was an important window into the cultural world for me. Back then, I absorbed everything like a sponge. As a teenager in the 1960s, I was, of course, a rock fan. I grew up just outside of New Haven, Connecticut.
Luckily, my parents were very tolerant and let me go to concerts alone from an early age. Hitchhiking was the common way to get around back then! I saw all the big acts of that time live, including Jimi Hendrix.

And how did the cassettes come about…

I had a stereo system on my desk, in New Haven and later when I lived in Queens.
The radio ran 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
I usually tuned into WKCR, and whenever I heard something interesting, I pressed the record button.
Later, I carefully sorted the things and put together tapes that I listened to with friends.

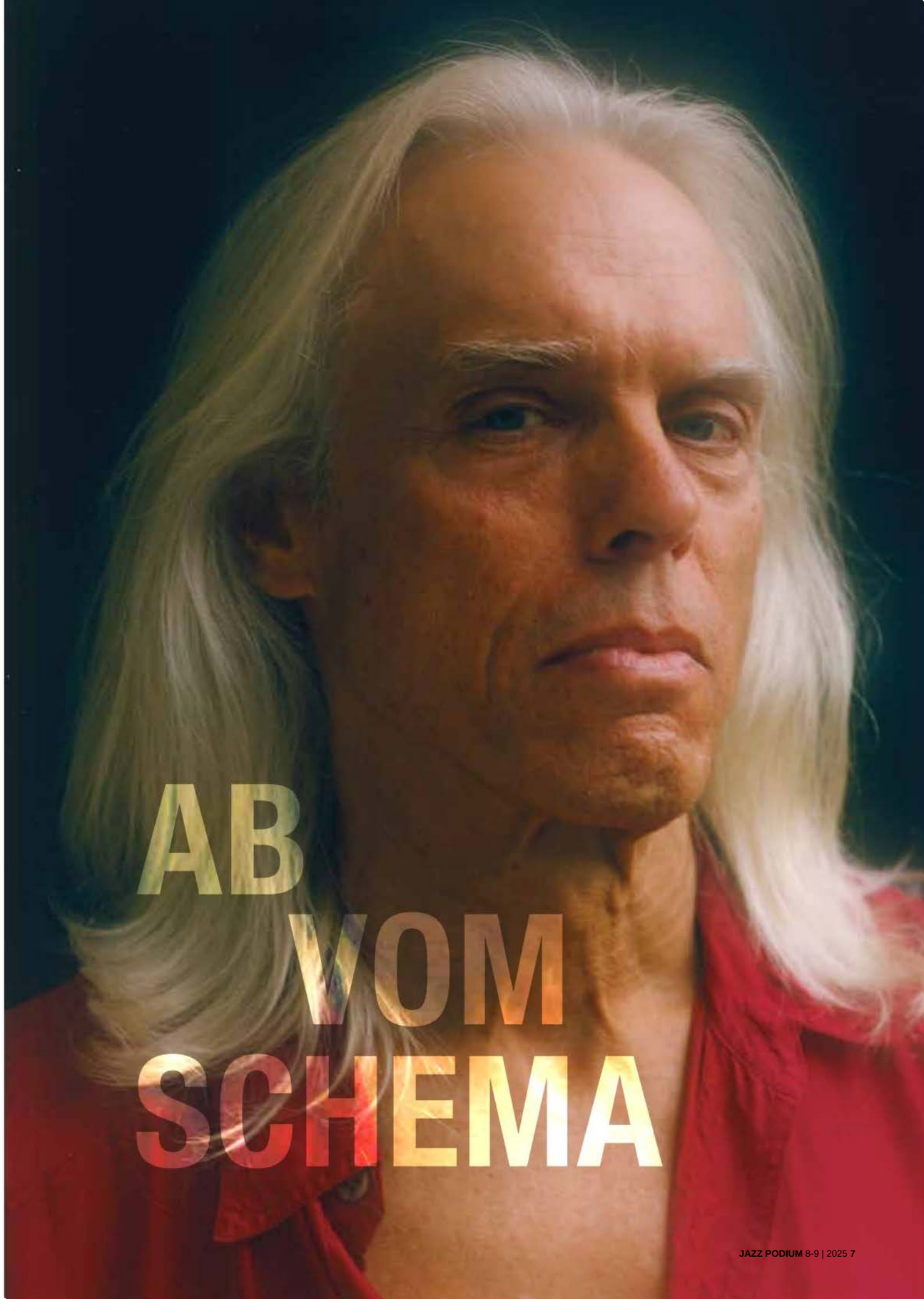
Which musical styles were in the foreground?

I'm interested in all kinds of music. Back then, it was primarily blues, both acoustic and electric, R&B, country, folk, gospel, and various strands of pop culture, but also jazz, of course. My collection also includes an extensive humor section. And, of course, my own musical work since 1974 is documented here. Back then, I received a cassette recorder with two good microphones that I could use to record my gigs, and I did this pretty systematically.

Who did you play music with back then?

Oh, with all sorts of people. There are recordings with Anthony Davis, Wadada Leo Smith, George Lewis, and also Marilyn Crispell and Reggie Workman... A remarkable and, above all, well-organized bootleg collection, all unique!

Here on the other side are – on DAT, CD and DVD – all the things I have recorded with the Anthony Braxton Quartet, the Trio BassDrumBone [since 1977] and my own Quintet - and Quartets, then all the collaborations -



in chronological order and ascending by instrumentation, duos, trios, etc.
In total, I'm represented on over 250 recordings.

Are you a collector with a strong sense of order?
Absolutely! Archiving is admittedly a bit OCD in nature.
I'm amazed that all these things have stayed together, despite all my moves, and I'm glad to have them around me again.

(In the living room is the equally impressive vinyl collection. It contains several rarities, such as a 25 cm record by Warren "Baby" Dodds, probably the first solo drum album in jazz history, in its original sleeve. Shelves filled with memorabilia of all kinds recall the family history. A few first editions of Ernest Hemingway books are also there. "They're from my grandmother," says the musician. "We're not just namesakes, we're related.")

Wherever you look, you'll find origami standing, hanging, or floating—small, folded paper figures, mostly birds, sometimes single, sometimes entire flocks. What's the story behind them?

They are the work of my partner Izumi Kimura and are intended
give me strength. Izumi is Japanese, but she's lived in Ireland for so long that she's almost become Irish.

How did you meet? Through music. Izumi is an excellent, classically trained pianist, but she wanted to learn more about the art of improvisation. We worked together intensively for three or four years, and gradually we fell in love. At that time, we were both already in relationships, we both had grown children. We've realized several projects together, as a duo, but also with bassist Barry Guy, a wonderful musician and close friend. In 2019, we released the trio album "Illuminated Silence," and in December 2023, we recorded "Six Hands Open As One" in Ireland, which was released the following summer.

The centerpiece of this album is the four-part suite "The Unexpected," which you wrote.
Yes, this work is very dear to my heart—with it, I tried to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the devastation of that war. For Izumi and me, our music doesn't exist in a vacuum. It reflects the current political situation in the world. We talk about it constantly and feel like we've never lived in a worse present.

Improvisation is a central element of your work. How would you define the term?
It can mean very different things. In the jazz tradition, it naturally means the modification of a certain
Theme using a harmonic, melodic or rhythmic structure, usually following the theme-improvisation-theme scheme, where the source material is given.

There are countless variations of this. Then there are the more structured patterns, sometimes illustrated with graphics, as Anthony Braxton uses them, and of course the completely free improvisation, in which nothing is predetermined.

Improvisation is a central element of your work. How would you define the term? It can mean a variety of things. In the jazz tradition, of course, it means the modification of a particular theme using a harmonic, melodic, or rhythmic structure, usually following the theme-improv-theme pattern, where the source material is given. There are countless variations of this. Then there are the more structured patterns, sometimes illustrated with graphics, such as those used by Anthony Braxton, and of course completely free improvisation, where nothing is predetermined. Izumi and I have found our own path in this broad field. All our parameters are flexible, but at the same time we are concerned with formal rigor and clarity. We have spent months exploring and developing these ideas.

They participate in several formations in the independent scene. Is it completely different there?
Yes, they are really two different things. Don't get me wrong: I love the spontaneous interplay based on the motto *"see what happens,"* the kind of free jazz where the concerts are simply spontaneous sessions in front of an audience. But our duo work is about something else.

Can you specify this something?
Let's take an example. The first track on our new album, "How the Dust Falls," is called "Waterspear." Izumi only plays two chords on it. That's all there is. But you can play them with different attitudes, not just louder or quieter, softer or harder. It's about the energy within the sound. Izumi releases this energy in different ways. She also varies the timing.

And what do you do in the meantime?
My role is to create my own track with the drums and not just react, be it in the sense of snuggling up or resisting.

We seek neither confrontation nor premature reconciliation, but rather a form of coexistence. This requires a high degree of concentration, because, of course, one always has the reflex to react empathetically and, so to speak, to agree with the other or to let them have their way. After all, we are human beings!

What kind of audience do you have in mind for this experiment?
I have no idea, because we're really trying something unusual. The music is, in a way, bare, stark, and naked. This gives listeners the opportunity to fill the spaces with their own imaginations, as if encountering abstract works of art, and to discover the beauty in the in-between worlds.

As a drummer, did you use any special techniques during the recording?
I've always loved the sound of cymbals, and I manipulate them not only with the sticks but also with the bow. I've developed a playing style with the bow that allows me to shape melodic sequences. Izumi has an incredible ear, and she's been looking for ways to play the piano—or prepare it—to create harmonies between the bowed cymbal and the piano. This then of course goes into the microtonal range.

Let us look back to your early years from this, your latest album. Have you always wanted to
Become a drummer?
I was ten when I started playing drums seriously.
Before that, I had taken piano lessons. That was almost unavoidable in our family. But then my parents gave me a snare drum and a cymbal, and I spent a year banging away on them like crazy. This obviously impressed them, because the following year I got a full drum kit for Christmas

With Izumi Kimura and Barry Guy

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and I haven't stopped playing since. We lived in our own house in a rural area; there were no neighbors to consider. But my parents must have thought more than once about whether it was a good idea to give me a drum kit!

They probably thought more than once about whether it was a good idea to give me a drum kit! Especially since Keith Moon of The Who was my idol back then.

What kind of music did you play at home?
I had two older brothers who infected me with their enthusiasm for rock 'n' roll, blues, and, oddly enough, electronic music. One of them was also very interested in 20th-century classical music. They were seven and ten years older than me, respectively, and I grew up in their worlds, so to speak, as a kid. All three of us collected records; each of us had a stereo in our room.

Do you still remember the first record you bought yourself?

Absolutely! That was "Freak Out" by The Mothers of Invention.
Not a bad start, considering I had no idea who Frank Zappa was back then! I just saw the album cover and said, "I have to have that!"

Which drummers other than Keith Moon impressed you the most in those early years?
Mitch Mitchell, Ginger Baker, Tony Williams; generally drummers who saw themselves not only as timekeepers, but also as solo and melody instruments

treated. I saw The Who three times back then.
I was only eleven or twelve, but at festivals, I always managed to work my way to the edge of the stage among all the stoned hippies. The music scene was so vibrant and inclusive back then; there weren't the strictly genre-specific communities we have today.

And how did jazz come into your teenage world?
Again, through the radio. My dad had a few popular jazz records, Dave Brubeck's "Time Out," and the like, but then I went to boarding school an hour's drive outside of New York, and there I could receive all the New York stations. WBAI, for example. The nightly broadcasts on Ed Beech's WRVR became especially important to me.

He captivated entire generations of jazz fans by playing, primarily, the Blue Note catalog over and over again.
Back then, I was in rock and blues bands, but I learned to swing by drumming along to the radio. Then, in the school library, I discovered the magazine *DownBeat,* which I devoured from then on. There was no internet yet; information was precious.

Can you remember any of the articles in *DownBeat ?*
One that became very important to me was the review of the album "People in Sorrow" by the Art Ensemble of Chicago.
I wrote to the reviewer, asking where I could get the record, actually got hold of it, and listened to it incessantly. This alienated several friends who couldn't relate to this free music. From Roscoe Mitchell and Lester Bowie, I moved on to Sun Ra and the late John Coltrane.

How did your training continue?

From boarding school, I went to the Berklee School of Music, but I wasn't happy there. Since I hadn't had any formal lessons up to that point, I was assigned to the lowest level. I was bored there, because I could already play.
I had even placed a classified ad in *Rolling Stone* magazine saying I was looking for a pianist and a bassist to form a trio.

A bassist from the same area as me had contacted me, and the pianist he brought with him was none other than Anthony Davis. He was four years older than me and from then on became one of my most important musical partners.

Why did you have a hard time with Berklee College?

Formal instruction didn't suit me, even though I had some very good teachers. I'm essentially a self-taught artist anyway. I even taught myself to read. I've always rebelled against institutions. That spring, the Boston jazz club's the Jazz Workshop & Paul's Mall, which was within walking distance of my dorm, became more important to me than the classes. I went there almost every night, and my roommate figured out how we could get in through the back door so we didn't need a ticket. Ornette Coleman, David Izenzon, Ed Blackwell, and Dewey Redman, for example, played there for a whole week. I plucked up the courage to talk to them, and they were really nice to me. Later, I worked with some of them. That was the good side of my Berklee/Boston experience.

Have you always been more interested in practice than theory?

Absolutely! Although I have to admit, I had no clue about a lot of things back then. I barely knew the standards you play at jam sessions. Initially, I knew nothing about Miles Davis and Charles Mingus – the latter later became the most important figure in jazz for me. Anthony Davis and I transcribed his pieces, played them, and discussed them endlessly. Mingus remained a formative influence on me until I formed my own quintet. His way of orchestrating pieces fascinated me beyond belief.

What happened after the Berklee experiment?

When I returned to New Haven, I immersed myself in a vibrant jazz scene with George Lewis, Anthony Davis, Wadada Leo Smith, and many others. I moved into my own apartment and began to stand on my own two feet. I told my parents they didn't have to support me anymore and took literally every gig I could get. With [bassist] Mark Helias, I was able to swing the way I wanted to for the first time. I also started teaching early on, which brought in extra money. I also worked on a project for integration through the arts in New Haven. At that time, segregation was still very strong; we tried to involve young people from the Italian, Black, and white neighborhoods in cultural activities such as doing painting and music together.

But you didn't stay in New Haven.

No, I moved to New York, and from then on I stopped teaching. I focused on my own music.
For a while, I worked in construction, where I acquired practical skills that were very useful to me later.

And while renovating a brownstone in Brooklyn, I met a literature professor who introduced me to William Faulkner. That, too, opened up a new world for me: I learned to understand complex texts. At that time, I was playing solo a lot, released half a dozen solo albums, and developed my own notation concept. In 1980, I came to Europe for the first time, with [trombonist] Ray Anderson; I had already been playing with him for three years. Among other things, we performed with his quartet Harrisburg Half Life in Moers. In 1984, I did a solo tour of Europe, lugging all my equipment along alone.

Which drummers were particularly important to you?

Especially Max Roach. His solo work was the most profound.
He was a role model for me. After one of his solo concerts, I presented him with my first solo record. I almost died of excitement. Max was also an incredible storyteller. I recorded all of his interviews to use in my teaching. If you want to know what bebop is, you have to listen to what Max says.

How did your collaboration with Anthony Braxton come about?

I met him through Wadada Leo Smith in New Haven in the 1970s. In 1983, he invited me to tour with him. That was the beginning of a long and intense collaboration. On Bandcamp, under Burning Ambulance Music, you can listen to four concerts
from our 1985 UK tour. Considering they were recorded on a mono cassette recorder, they don't sound bad at all. They include previously unreleased recordings of the quartet, which I highly recommend.

Braxton is often described as "difficult." What was your experience with him?

He's certainly not easy, but who is? We disagreed from time to time, but he was an incredible source of inspiration. A generous man, despite living on the poverty line for a long time. He had to support a family with three children. It was such a contradiction: He didn't know where to get the money for his most urgent daily needs, he had to borrow five dollars from all sorts of people, and at the same time he spoke with incredible passion about a gigantic opera project he wanted to realize.

How did you define your role as a musician back then, and how do you do it today?

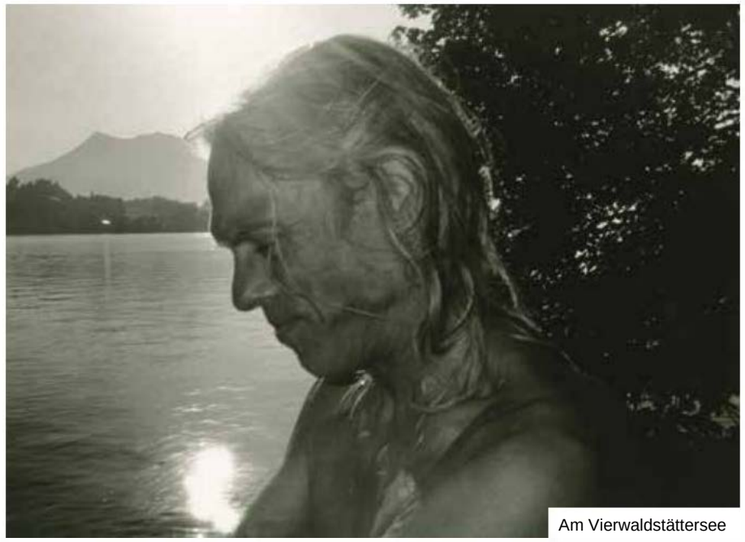
I have always seen myself as a bandleader and composer, also as a facilitator, not just an accompanist.
I composed a string quartet and orchestral works, some of which are quite complex and therefore difficult to perform. I also became interested in the possibilities of computers early on. Sequencing was very helpful for me. Before that, I had been composing using two cassette recorders. I worked with various devices, using which I recorded the voices one after the other. Sampling opened many doors for me.

When you came to Switzerland, could you have imagined that you would stay so long?

Not at all! I had taught at the New School in New York for five years. I loved it there, even though the pay wasn't good. Then an inquiry came from Hami Hämmerli, the director of the Lucerne Jazz Academy. Fabian Kuratli had died of cancer at the age of just 38, and they needed someone quickly. They knew me because I had already led workshops there, and I was hired, although they were surprised to discover that I didn't have a university degree.

Was the decision to move to Europe easy for you?

Not at all. During my first year in Lucerne, there were many family problems at home. And after a year, I was faced with another difficult decision, because The New School in New York was desperate to have me back. But I decided to stay here. I liked being able to contribute my diverse skills here at the university.



Am Vierwaldstättersee

Did Switzerland welcome you with open arms?

I first had to learn to read the culture and society and master the language. This process was slowed down, however, by continuing to teach in English, the language the students would later need. But now I've truly settled here, know many people, appreciate the quality of life, and for the first time in my life, I have something resembling financial security. Don't forget: Until I was over fifty, I lived hand to mouth!

Your son Jordan means a lot to you. He has his made his own way...

Fortunately, he's developed wonderfully; today he's a well-known photographer and director, and has been living in London for many years. Among many other things, he's made a name for himself in fashion photography, having shot photo series for many magazines and directed campaigns for companies like Gucci and Comme des Garçons. He's the partner of FKA Twigs, whose tour he just directed. I saw the show in Paris and was completely blown away. Looking back, I think Jordan and I had a tough time at times because we're so similar. He, too, is a self-taught rebel who liked to push his boundaries, teach his teachers, and was already working as a professional photographer at 17.

What does your daily life look like these days when you're not on tour?

I'm a morning person. I go swimming early as often as possible. That gives me the energy for everything else. I work hard because I'm not just a musician, but also my own manager and record producer.

I also organize my own tours. I get invitations from musicians all the time. But the collaboration with Izumi is my favorite and most important. This summer we'll be performing in New York and Canada.

Swimming is important to you…

It has become a vital part of my life, not only as a physical but also as a mental exercise, in all seasons. Even temperatures below ten degrees Celsius don't faze me.

Finally, would you like to tell us something about your long-term song project, which ultimately led to the album »Afterlife« released at the end of 2022?

Of course! It all started around the turn of the millennium. I was always interested in songs, so I wrote quite a few myself, but back then I didn't feel ready to sing myself. So I asked Lisa Sokolov to do it for me.

I sang them to her, and we developed my ideas together. At the time, I was living separately from my wife, but very close to the family, so I could still fulfill my responsibilities as a father. I had a tiny apartment where I invited various musicians to work on the recordings, which were then released as an album. Later, I sang and produced covers of songs I admired, such as those by Bob Dylan, Geeshie Wiley, Lou Reed, Paul Simon, and the Monroe Brothers. Gradually, my own songs emerged. In them, I tried to combine my idea of pop music with my love of orchestration. The album »Afterlife« is the result of four years of concentrated work.

And was it a success?

Not really commercially, but it was an important creative experience for me. Of course, you could accuse my recording of being eclectic. I love a lot of things. That's why I don't fit the indie pop mold, where the idea is to do only one clearly defined, instantly recognizable thing. I don't fit any mold anyway! I'm always looking for new ways of expression. And who knows: Maybe one day success will come. I've certainly received plenty of positive feedback for my songs!