



KEVIN KELLER: ON A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

"I'm always pondering these big questions of life, and death, and how we fit into this vast universe that we're in. Questions like 'Where are we from? Where are we going? What does it all mean?'" Kevin Keller is sitting in his Manhattan studio, sipping a cup of coffee as he gazes at a computer screen, contemplating the life's journey that has led to this moment.

"It's funny - you'd think it would've been more logical for me to go into religious studies, or psychology, or psychedelic therapy - but music was my calling. Music and sound are very powerful tools that can open the door to emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences."

Even now, in his 50's, Keller still displays the youthfulness of a young kid, eyes glued to the television set in 1977 watching "2001: A Space Odyssey" for the first time. "Since I was 10 or 12 when I first saw films like *2001* and *Altered States*, I was very impressionable, and I became obsessed with the idea of consciousness and memory and dreams, the mind, how we comprehend things. Wondering 'What if this is a dream?' Because I tend to remember my dreams, there's very little separation in my mind between dreams and reality. All of that material works its way, subconsciously, into what I do as an artist. Maybe what I'm trying to tackle, in my life and as a creative person, is something that is beyond words, and that's why I chose music."

Growing up in Northern California, Keller started playing piano as a teen, eventually teaching himself to read music so that he could play Debussy. This early fascination with Impressionism would later influence Keller's "ambient chamber music". But his gateway into electronic music came when a friend introduced him to the sounds of Krautrock legends Tangerine Dream, synthesizer pioneer Klaus Schulze, and the ambient soundscapes of Brian Eno. "Albums like *Phaedra* and *Mirage* and *On Land* - they're unflinching in their exploration of darker themes. They drop you into this otherworldly place and you never get out, you're stuck there. You're free to travel around in it, but you won't get out. It's dark from beginning to end, and maybe once in a while you might see a ray of sunlight popping through.

That's the music that got me excited back in high school. I made sure I was home every Saturday night to hear that week's *Hearts of Space* show. That's how I discovered all of those artists. I think of this as music for solitary exploration. The kind of music where you put on headphones, close your eyes and go away. And maybe what you're doing is accessing Timothy Leary's 'eighth circuit of the brain', the non-terrestrial quantum consciousness."

Now in his third decade as a recording artist, Keller has become a favorite on both *Hearts of Space* and *Echoes*, with his albums being named "CD of the Month" and winning two ZMR Awards for "Best Neo-Classical Album". Beyond that, he regularly receives commissions from ballet companies, and has recently moved into the field of film and television scores. Keller has also worked with cellists Clarice Jensen and David Darling, as well as Kronos Quartet and the JACK Quartet.

Keller has seen the genre change since those early days listening to *Hearts of Space*. "Sometimes I'll just go onto Spotify or iTunes to check out what other artists are doing. I'm always curious. And what I'm hearing and sensing is a lot of fear. It seems clear to me that artists are afraid of making music that might disturb people. I feel like composers are afraid to go into darker places for fear of losing some part of their audience - as if people might say, 'Oh, I don't want to hear anything that reminds me of the dark part of our existence, or the fact that we're all going to die.'

Thanks to Stanley Kubrick, I grew up with the idea that it was totally normal to go from Ligeti's Requiem to the 'Blue Danube' Waltz to Richard Strauss to Khachaturian and back to Ligeti. There was a through-line to it, and it all made sense. It's like yin and yang, dark and light, and you need both of those things. Otherwise, if you have a genre that is only relaxing and beautiful and calming, it ends up losing its meaning. You can't have that without also having something that's disturbing, or dark, or terrifying. I'm not saying I intend to terrify people, but I'm not afraid, as an artist, to go to that place. Talking about death, decay, the fading of things. Afterlife, or maybe lack of afterlife."

Whether dealing with the death of a loved one on *Intermezzo* or *In Absentia*, or the death of the ego on *The Day I Met Myself*, or the near-death experience on *The Front Porch of Heaven*, each of Keller's albums unfolds in a cinematic fashion, taking the listener on a guided journey.

"I feel like I'm telling the same story over and over, and hopefully getting better at it each time. That's how it feels to me. When I think about the structure of an album, or the journey of the music from A to B, what always strikes me is 'Oh, I've already done this,' - but I keep coming back to it, as if there's this subconscious idea that's saying, 'No, no, you haven't got it quite yet. You're getting closer' - or maybe 'you got farther away.' I think there is some story or idea in there that wants to come out, and I don't think there's any escape. Whatever that is, even if I say, 'I'm not going to write about that,' it's still there."

Looking ahead to Keller's future explorations, he says, "I'm beginning to think that maybe the best way into the next project is for me to step out of the way. It's okay to be in research mode right now, like 'what can I do with the Phrygian scale?', but at a certain point I need to step aside and let it happen. Instead of taking weeks, or months maybe, to write a piece of music, I sit down one day and begin playing with sounds and let them lead me to something - and maybe that's better than being so pre-planned about it. That allows the subconscious to come in."

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