

Petra Haden and Mike Watt: The Aquarium Drunkard Interview

Mike Watt and Petra Haden thrive on collaboration. Across dozens of bands and projects--including Watt's recent stint with Jane's Addiction offshoot Porno for Pyros, and Haden's outings with Bill Frisell and Greg Anderson of Sunn O)))--the two are constantly figuring out novel ways to bring their musical expression into alignment with other players and artists. And while they've collaborated together since Watt's 1995 solo debut *Ball-Hog or Tugboat?*, their most recent collaboration under the Pelicanman banner, *Planet Chernobyl*, sounds unlike anything they've ever done. A 15- song folk rock, avant-garde interpretation of beat poet Charles Plymell's epic poem about the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, it finds Haden and Watt piecing together strands of bass, mandolin, violin, and vocals into a fully formed opera. Recently, they joined us to discuss it and share how this unique project came together. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and cohesion.

j woodbury

Aquarium Drunkard: The Pelicanman album is a fascinating listen. I can't think of another record that sounds like this one. It's really got its own sonic world going on. When you hear somebody say, "It's a 15-part opera about the Chernobyl disaster," that conjures up these ideas that it's going to be a really dour record, but it's not at all. It's so engaging and overlapping.

Mike Watt: I think it's because of the process.

AD: How so?

Mike Watt: What happened was I got this friend - he's an older man. He's 88 now, is that right, Pet?

Petra Haden: I think he's 88, yeah.

Mike Watt: And I think he's going to be 89 in a couple months or a month or two. So anyway, his name is Charlie Plymell. He's originally from Wichita. He's living in Cherry Valley, New York. He was involved with the Beats. In fact, he lived in San Francisco in the early sixties with Neal Cassidy on Gough Street. He printed the first Mr. Natural artwork by R. Crumb, the first *Zap Comix*.

Anyway, I met him through Thurst at a poetry thing. Thurson Moore, Byron Coley, and me did a poetry thing in western Massachusetts. Grant Hart was there, too, from the Huskers. I'm not much of a poet, man, but they had me spiel a lot, but I made this connection with this older gentleman Charles. He's very interesting, so I read his book, *The Last of the Moccasins*.

He's got this poem "Planet Chernobyl," and it had 15 stanzas. Now, I have a little history with opera. I've written three of them. In a lot of music traditions, the musician makes music, and there's a guy who writes the words, the libretto, and they're separate. But I started thinking about this, and I got this China Hoffner, a Hofner Beatles bass, and I made the music for this on that. I'd send recordings and Charlie's spiel to Petra and say, "You put in some, say, mandolin and violin." We did it one piece at a time, over the course of the pandemic and the lockdown.

Petra Haden: We had been talking about recording this for a long time, even before COVID, but Watt was busy and I was busy and it took a long time to happen. When the pandemic started, I was on tour with Bill Frisell, and thankfully we were able to finish our tour. Usually, when I end a tour, I go into a weird kind of depression. You've heard of the post-tour depression, right? I sit at home and I'm kind of mopey. Then, on top of that, the pandemic was happening--I'm losing work and I don't know how to apply for unemployment. [Laughs] My brain was really feeling overwhelmed. And Watt says, "This is a good time to really start *Planet Chernobyl*." It helped me a lot mentally, even though the subject matter is depressing and sad. It got me out of my bed in my chair, in front of my computer. I'd get out of bed, drink coffee, have breakfast, and work on this. It helped me a lot, spiritually.

AD: You didn't play just *any* mandolin, you played your grandmother's mandolin?

Petra Haden: My grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side were in a mandolin orchestra. It's tuned like a violin. I never took mandolin lessons,

but it's tuned like a violin, so it's like playing the violin as a guitar or something. I've been playing it since I was a kid. I would listen to jazz records and try to learn Pat Metheny solos. I like to imitate my favorite musicians. That's kind of how the records that I do now are. I do a lot of interpretations of movie music and rock songs, old classical pieces, jazz, because I love to play music that I love.

AD: Familial connections run through this album. Watt, your father was stationed on one of the first nuclear aircraft carriers, right?

Mike Watt: Sure. It's called the Enterprise. They just retired it. He was an engine room guy, machinist mate. He made it to chief. In the Army you call it "chief sergeant." He was an enlisted man. He joined at 17 years old. I was born when he was 19. You know that show *Happy Days*? When that came out, he said to me, "Those weren't fucking happy days." I thought about another connection. *The Who Sell Out*, from 1967. As Petra alluded to, when she's growing up, she's around jazz records, right? Petra did not listen to rock and roll as a girl. She didn't know about The Who. But that was me and D. Boon's favorite record. So I introduced her to that record. I think people like me and Petra use music to help our lives, you know what I mean? And she ends up making a whole piece on an 8-track I gave her, a reimagined version of *The Who Sell Out*. And Pete Townshend actually got to hear it and congratulated her on it.

AD: What was it like meeting Pete Townshend, Petra?

Petra Haden: I first talked to him on the phone and I couldn't believe I was talking to him. It was just incredible. He was so sweet and so nice, and he just thanked me. He said, "I want to thank you for doing this, and it's beautiful," and it was just so nice to hear, and then The Who played at Madison Square Garden in the early 2000s, and he invited me to go see them. And so I went and I was living in a dream. It was just really fun and happy, and those *are* happy days,

Mike Watt: Petra interprets stuff. It's not karaoke. It's not like some cover version to get by at a bar. It's a reimagination. You know what I'm saying? So that's why I had faith with this *Planet Chernobyl*, with Charlie's stuff.

Petra Haden: The challenging thing with *Planet Chernobyl* is...the term "singer/songwriter" is weird. I feel like I'm not good at writing a folk songs

with lyrics and music. I'm not Joni Mitchell, so I improvise. When I hear Watt's baselines, I just improvise a melody.

AD: You're saying the approach here was more tied to the tonal and harmonic, the melodic content, for you first, before the lyrics factored in?

Petra Haden: Exactly.

Mike Watt: I think rhythm too, though. She's got a good sense of rhythm also. And harmony. I mean, listen to her singing. And let me tell you this: her father's a bass player, Charlie Haden.

AD: Of course.

Mike Watt: So she's been around bass her whole life. Talk about familial connections!

AD: The poem doesn't only focus on Chernobyl only, it also highlights the mass death at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well. Charlie was of the Beat Generation, and he's maintained a connection to the protest element that informs jazz and punk. But the album doesn't dictate to the listener how they're supposed to feel about it. You know what I mean?

Mike Watt: You're talking about whether or not it's "didactic."

AD: Exactly. It's not that kind of art.

Mike Watt: It's about the communication we're getting. Charlie, through literature, through words. Me through bass, music. Petra, the interpreter. It's all through artistic expression.

Petra Haden: Sometimes I make the mistake of reading what people say in reviews or whatever. I don't know where I saw this, but someone said, "Oh, it sounds too happy. The *Planet Chernobyl* music, it just sounds too light." I don't know how this person put it, I'm paraphrasing, but I was thinking, well, I mean, are people expecting me to play? "*Dun, dun, dun, duuuuun?*"

Mike Watt: Can I give you an example here? It's about *Huck Finn*. Jim and Huck are on the raft, right? They're dealing with some fucking heavy shit-- racist shit, class divisions, Huck getting beat by his pop, this asshole. There's

a lot of heavy shit going on, but there's all kinds of funny shit too. And remember: Mark Twain hated *Tom Sawyer*. That was just to get paid. He really believed in *Huck Finn*.

AD: It's nice when absurdity and tonal contrast can play a part. I think about some of the projects you've both done, like Petra with The Lord, on Southern Lord. A band like Sunn O))) is known for really foreboding stuff, but with a record like *Monoliths and Dimensions*, or *Life Metal*, it's more major key, ecstatic, but still heavy as hell. It's not on the band to play to someone's expectations, but as listeners we do bring those to the table too.

Mike Watt: One of the cantos in Dante's *Inferno* ends with one of the devils that saying he's made a trumpet out of his ass. He goes to fart, you know? You're talking about this heavy, heavy shit but it's human expression. But I was really intrigued by Petra's interpretation, I thought it was very honest and natural, like the reed resonates or the wind blows.

Petra Haden: You just put the clay on the wheel and mold. You build a pot, you're building something, you're creating something. And that's when I heard Watt's music and I read Charles' words, that's what I felt like I was doing. That's what got me up every morning. I didn't feel locked down anymore. I was creating.

Mike Watt: We were supplying her the clay!

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