

ON THE BEAT

Benefit Concert(s) for Rob Morsberger

By Thomas Staudter

With the release of his new CD, *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, Rob Morsberger is undeniably at the top of his songwriting and performing career. He is also battling brain cancer, and though in possession of medical insurance, racking up the kinds of bills that independent musicians struggle to pay. I hope my readers will help support this wonderful artist and attend one of the two benefit concerts for him at the BeanRunner Café in Peekskill on Sunday, March 4.

When a good friend has brain cancer, the imperative question at the start of every interaction with him or her is, How are you feeling? This is what establishes hope and acceptance moving forward. There is so much mystery and unknowing in terms of battling a major illness; each body responds to treatments differently, and so progress, or the lack of, in the fight to return to “normal” good health runs along a narrative arc, where each report becomes its own weighty chapter.

Rob told me this week he’s feeling pretty good. “My kind of brain cancer inevitably kills you,” he said, “so it’s a waiting game and a matter of holding death off. I’m open to the possibility that I’ll escape this fate, but few do.” After surgery last September, Rob said his health greatly improved, and that he has his good and bad days. He is continuing to write and perform, having just completed a decent-sized tour.

Though Morsberger is well known in television circles for his soundtracks, most notably the quirky accompaniment for *Nova scienceNow* on PBS, he also earned a good deal of notoriety in the late 1990s Gotham music scene as the leader of the Robert Secret Band, formed with three top-notch players—guitarist Jon Herington, bassist Paul Ossola and drummer Robin Gould—whose credits stretch from Steely Dan to Levon Helms and Carly Simon.

Initially, Morsberger “hid” his leadership of his band (and thus adopting the moniker “Robert Secret”) because he was starting to score music jobs for TV at the time and didn’t want his pop music career to become an issue with future employers, he said. The band released two CDs—*Waiting for Wood* in 1999 and *Relativity (Blues)* the following year—and then Morsberger’s television work picked up. It took several years for Morsberger to sneak away long enough from his so-called “day job” to write and record his third CD, *A Periodic Rush of Waves*, which appeared in 2006 and under his true name.

For *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, Morsberger first re-convened Herington and Gould, with Zev Katz and Paul Socolow splitting the bass duties, and at the urging of documentary filmmaker and fellow Croton-on-Hudson resident Dave Davidson, began work on the title track, which underscores a 1927 silent film by Hans Richter, an artist and one of the founders of the Dada Movement. In the chorus of the song, Morsberger sings, “Hello, everybody, there’s no time for tears / Baby, it’s a new life, everyday”—an easily understandable statement considering what this singer-songwriter is going through.

Elsewhere on the album—there’s a spooky rocker featuring sterling instrumental breaks from Morsberger and Herington called “The Great Whatever”; a poignant power ballad about spirituality titled “Feather in a Stream” which brings to mind both The

Beatles' "Let it Be" and Radiohead; a piano-led, heartbreaking country rocker about Charles Floyd, the only casualty on the Lewis and Clark Expedition (in which Morsberger sings, "Father I must go away now to the other side"); and "The Distinguished Thing," based on author Henry James's reported last words—there are enough explicit intimations of mortality and the singer's impending finality (much of it accompanied by jaunty melodies and sprightly rhythms) to make a listener wonder if Morsberger's illness directed the lyrical content and whether he was coming to terms with morbidity "in the grooves," so to speak.

But one of the remarkable aspects of *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, beyond the fact that each of the album's eleven songs is a gem, is the fact that Morsberger had the whole collection written before he became ill and was diagnosed with cancer.

"Looking back, I can see that I anticipated my illness with this record," said Morsberger, who noted that he'd just finished writing "Feather in a Stream" when he told that he had a grade 4 glioblastoma tumor, a malignant brain cancer. "In the hospital, I vowed to finish the record and once out worked hard to get it done." The subconscious connections between his songwriting and an illness not yet manifested are "things I know when I think about them are things I don't want to think about," Morsberger said. "I want to know I'll be walking away from this, and I don't want to say that I anticipated my own death."

Mostly, *Ghosts Before Breakfast* reminds me of Morsberger's prior album, *Chronicle of a Literal Man*, in that the songs are full of literary, historical and musical references. There's "Christina in Her Salon" is based on Sweden's androgynous queen in the 1600s, a look at Croton-on-Hudson through the ages in "The Wild Wind," life in the Manhattan fashion scene in "Celebrity Artist," nods to David Bowie, The Beatles, the Kinks, Elvis Costello and Elton John musically, a tune called "Rocket Science" that stands along with his old Robert Secret stuff, along with the aforementioned direct allusions to James and Floyd.

"I'm much less learned than people think," said Morsberger with a chuckle. Other songs on the album, like "Cobblestones" and "For Heaven's Sake," he noted, come from a more autobiographical place, but mixing up the subject matter lyrically is always his intention.

Originally born in Oxford, Ohio, Morsberger spent his teenage years in Oxford, England, where his father was the Ruskin Master of Drawing at the university there. He began playing the bassoon at 11 after giving up on piano lessons, and kept up music studies through Edinburgh University, all the while digging The Beatles and Bob Dylan. In college, he took up piano again and afterwards found work in various bands and as a dance accompanist. With a résumé sporting commissions for original scores with the Scottish Ballet and BBC Radio Scotland, he moved to New York in 1985 and slowly worked his way up as both a sideman and composer.

In 1990, Morsberger was hired as a songwriter for Famous Music, the publishing division of Paramount, and began to craft a number of songs about science. Years later, the experience would prove valuable when he started writing for *NOVA* and later *NOVA scienceNOW*, where he appeared as a Musical Correspondent singing about the prime numbers and statistics, among other subjects.

A stay-at-home dad throughout his career, Morsberger has managed to find the necessary balance between a devotion to his family and the requirements of his career has

been a challenge. His seven-year-old son Elan was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome and has needed several major surgeries and long hospitalizations. Morsberger and his wife Lisa, a flutist and music teacher (she plays on *Ghosts Before Breakfast*), have three other children from previous marriages as well. A bunch of new songs, he said, are about Elan.

“I don’t know he does it,” said Peter Calo, the Croton-based guitar ace and Morsberger pal who is behind the benefit concerts on Sunday. “His music, the writing, vocals, production—it’s all coming together for Rob. He’s on a mission now and really focused. It’s remarkable, and we’re all pulling for him.”

Living with Cancer: A Benefit Concert for Rob Morsberger featuring Morsberger, Peter Calo and “many special guests” will take place on Sunday, March 4 at the BeanRunner Café, 201 S. Division St., Peekskill, NY. There will be two shows at 4-6 PM and 7-9 PM. Suggested donation is \$30. For more info call (914) 737-1701 or visit beanrunnercafe.com.