

- NoD for Nelson -

This song began as an exercise. I thought it would be an interesting challenge to work on creating bass lines with the 5th degree out of bounds. This G minor groove came to me, and I started to explore it, with the note 'D' being disallowed. Any note could work, except no 'D'. Sure enough, it was fascinating how depriving a progression from just one note, especially one that's normally so dominant, added up to something with its very own character. It kept developing into a sort of blues, with the IV chord being more of a bVI chord, and the V chord being a bV chord. Then I started hearing the melody rising in fourths against it. It felt right to maintain a simplicity and organization to the melody, and in the end it started taking me back to my love for Oliver Nelson, whose sculptural clarity and organization have always stood out to me and been an inspiration.

- Grovi -

"Grovi" was all about feeling this groove, with its subtle jerks and stretches, and wanting to explore that, to see how expansive it could become within its particular lurch. For a while I thought the tune would be just about that groove in the bass and drums against which the horns would develop their diads, but over time the melody started to come after me...it even kept me up for a few nights, until I relented. I'm really glad I did.

- Skippaningam -

For quite some time, this was just a melody, which began as I walked home one morning after having dropped off my two boys at our neighborhood elementary school. This is always a special time for me, filled with the joy and playfulness of these boys, along with a great sense of possibility. Having spent the early morning with my guys and gotten them ready and off to their school day, I then turn home to get started on my musical work with as clear a head and spirit as I'll have all day.

By the time I got home that morning, the outline of this whole melody was in my head. I quickly wrote it down and made a few tweaks. For some time I thought it would remain as such, with all other accompanying elements left open. A number of weeks later, though, I decided that a fixed bass line under the melody would be a good thing to at least try, and it was, but it took me a really long time to work out, as I couldn't find an underlying principle for generating the line...I just had to work it out one note at a time. Drummer E.J. Strickland, who played the first Rhombal gig with us (at Korzo, Brooklyn in February 2015) came up with the idea of looping the last bit of the bridge as an outro for the solo section. In working on that idea over subsequent months, I eventually started hearing parts for the horns, so this developed into a bit more of an event in the transition back to the melody from the solo section.

- Loose Bay -

Like many of these tunes (now that I look back on it all) "Loose Bay" is its own sort of blues. It started as a shifting arpeggio that came to me at the piano and which, taken from a certain perspective, outlines a blues progression. I wanted to keep that veiled, though, so I looked into bass motion that avoids any expected roots or familiar paths. That, along with the very open groove profile gave the whole thing a floating, uprooted feel. The melody then came, and I added the B section for a bit of release and collective breathing. I love to hear this band just breathe.

- Esquima Dream -

This is exceptional among the pieces in that I'd written it prior to this period, and for another group, my Rosetta Trio with Liberty Ellman and Jamie Fox on acoustic and electric guitars. I started hearing it for the Rhombal quartet, though, once we'd gotten together a few times, especially because there was a drum part that I started feeling. Also, I thought it'd be interesting to arrange the guitar parts for the two horns. I'm really glad I did.

- How Close Are You -

This piece came directly from an interaction with my brother late in his illness. In his last few months, the tumors were taking over his body, and it was all about pain management. The trick was to take enough medication to stay ahead of the pain without taking too much, as that would lead to hallucinations and misery of a different sort.

On this day, when I called from Brooklyn to his hospital room in Memphis, he was really manic from the drugs. He kept saying "Hey man, how close are you?" thinking I was in town and on my way to visit him. This was equal parts heartbreaking and beautiful in revealing how much he wanted me to be right around the corner, on my way for a visit. I tried to ease him through the course of our conversation, and when it was over, this melody came to me. I wrote it down quickly, in its three phrases. It stayed just a melody for a few months, then I started hearing a countermelody (which I soon became more obsessed with than even the original melody) and harmonic implications, so I played around with those elements and eventually brought it to the band.

- Tshi -

"Tshi" embodies a lot of the goals or ideas I had in mind when putting this group together. I didn't want a chordal instrument, for instance, but wanted the band to be that instrument, sometimes vertically (as in this piece where we all move together), other times in a more additive, linear fashion. I also didn't want to overwrite, but really just set up environments for group exploration...normally short forms that we could open up, ourselves. And I wanted to deal with some straight up swing feel on a few tunes, which I hadn't done in any of my recent groups. This one is really simple and all about the developing diads in the horns, the odd fifth lobe to the main section before the turnaround, and a second section for some release.

- Birdwhistle -

"Birdwhistle" began during a late-night improvisation at the bass in my home studio. I was feeling the drum groove and began experimenting with some simple, wide bass chords. Then I started hearing the birds, so I pushed 'record' and whistled that part as I played the bass and felt the groove. Later I went back to transcribe, amend, and develop the whistled melody, leading me to the other sections, and on and on...

- Pulling Pillars ~ Outro for Patty -

"Pulling Pillars" began for me at the piano in a state of feeling and contemplating loss. Most directly, the loss of my brother. But the more complete view is that we'd recently lost both our

grandparents in Memphis over the last several years, and now with my brother gone, the sense of leaving my hometown behind felt quite definitive. This term, "pulling pillars," is a mining term used when workers are leaving a tapped-out mine for the last time. As they exit, they pull down the structural pillars behind themselves, allowing the ceiling to collapse and seal the mine.

"Outro for Patty" is an almost-direct transcription of a late-night piano improvisation from my home studio that occurred shortly after my brother's passing. Not a sad song, this is more of a send-off to his spirit, a celebration of his transition into a realm of pure love, which had begun even before his passing and which I was privileged to witness and engage with during some of our last visits. Toward the end, as his body was failing him (more accurately, as his body was being consumed by tumors) he transformed into a purer version of himself. His spirit emerged into primacy as he shed all the bullshit distractions and petty concerns that he'd for so many years allowed to cloud his path. It felt like heaven was coming to meet him, halfway. To be with him during this period of transition was an enormous blessing. Ultimately, that's what I'm taking with me...the beautifully courageous way he confronted his death and focused on expanding what was left of his humanity.

It's what inspired this album.