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Over the Rhine

Karin Bergquist and Linford Detweiler conjure fresh approaches to their soulful, American-roots-influenced pop.

By Céline Keating

SURRENDER IMPLIES DEFEAT, the waving of a white flag after an exhausting battle. But the latest release from the Ohio-based duo Over the Rhine, *The Long Surrender*, represents a mature reckoning with painful midlife, mid-career, and mid-marital truths. Karin Bergquist and Linford Detweiler have been musical and marital partners for 20 years, with 14 studio albums to their credit. “I think the title speaks to

our ongoing desire to let go of certain expectations, in favor of remaining open and curious,” Bergquist says.

That openness extended to the couple’s faith in placing their material in the hands of sonic alchemist and Grammy Award-winner Joe Henry, known for helping established musicians like Elvis Costello, Loudon Wainwright III, and Solomon Burke find new dimensions in their work. “We met Joe for the first time for coffee, the day before we began recording,” Detweiler says. “I believe that Joe’s preferred word for what ensued during our week of working together is *communion*. We walked away feeling like we had just experienced the week of a lifetime.”

Henry’s production respects and yet builds on Over the Rhine’s signature melancholic sensibility and poetic imagery in a graceful, intuitive way. “Joe said very little in advance about how he specifically wanted the record to sound,” Detweiler says. “Rather, he asked [us] to watch a 1957 Italian film: *Le Notti Bianche*.” The movie’s atmosphere—cool, misty, muted—is reflected in the languid, brooding arrangements. “I would probably attribute most of the credit of the atmosphere to drummer Jay Bellerose and keyboard player Keefus Ciancia,” Detweiler says. “Keefus arrived with a whole array of out-of-date keyboards and samplers and is responsible for making much of the record feel a bit otherworldly. Henry’s team [which included his son Levon on tenor sax and multi-instrumentalist Greg Leisz] were all wonderful conjurers and coconspirators.”

Bergquist and Detweiler are old hands at collaboration; while each is responsible for writing about a third of Over the Rhine’s material, they jointly write the last third.



Though they occasionally duet, as on the heartbreaking “Oh Yeah, By the Way,” vocals are Bergquist’s territory. Her rich, supple, and sultry voice can shape-shift through any kind of music, from bluesy to jazzy to rootsy. “We want different strains of American music to run through our records simultaneously,” Detweiler says. “When we write with the guitar, we tend to acknowledge our country and western, folk, blues, and Americana roots. When we sit down at the piano, our gospel and jazz roots tend to emerge.”

Both Bergquist and Detweiler play acoustic guitar (though Detweiler’s primary instrument is the piano), most often tuned down a step to D G C F A D. “The primary attraction

of the guitar for me has always been songwriters accompanying themselves,” Detweiler says. “There is subtle but infinite variety [of ways] singers strum an acoustic guitar—with a pick, without a pick, with relaxed fingers, with rigid fingers.” His picking style has roots in classical guitar. “I like hearing both skin and fingernails on the strings,” he says.

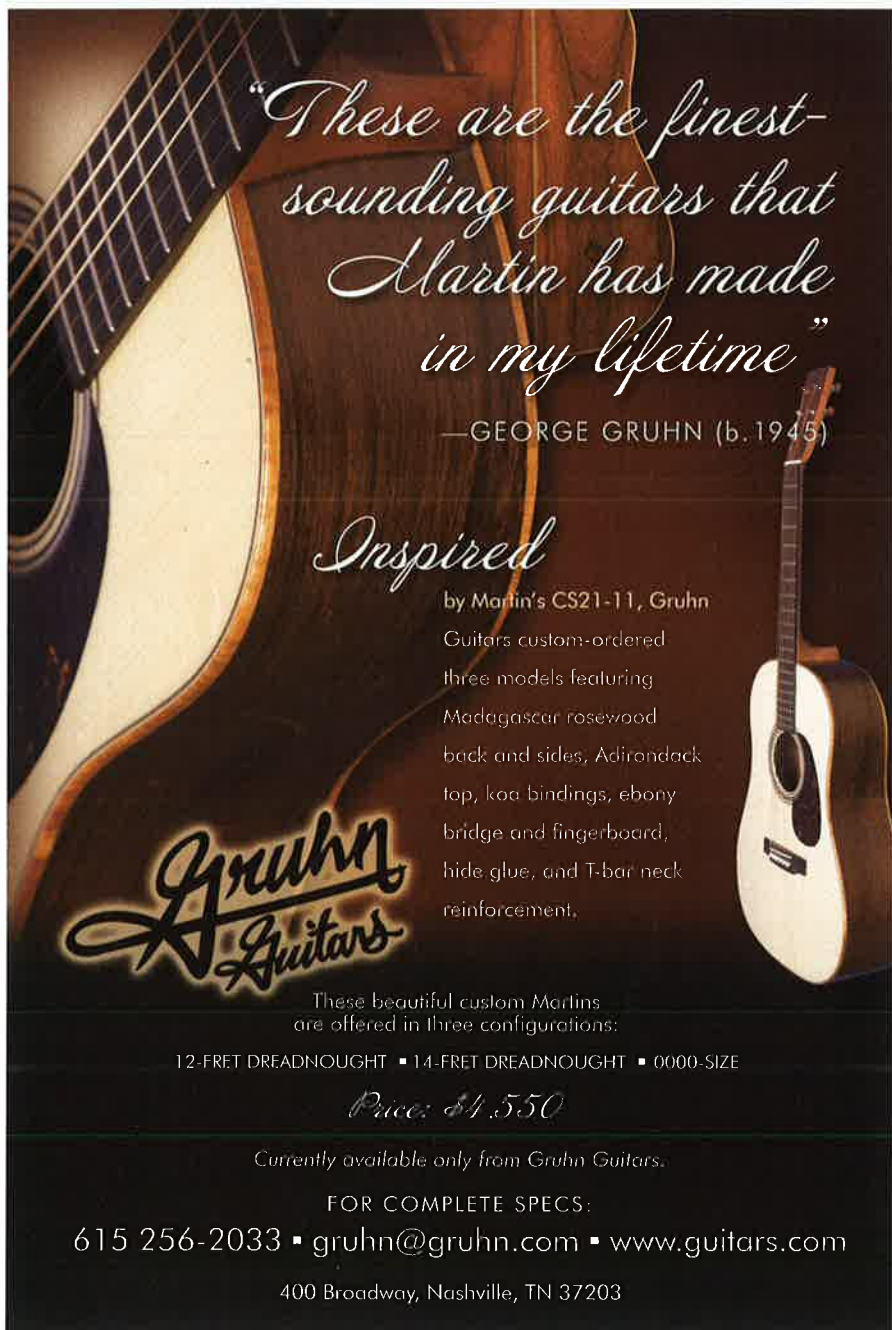
Then there’s Leisz’s pedal steel playing, which engages in delicious interplay on *The Long Surrender*, drawing sinuous, fleeting lines around the vocals, piano, and jangly acoustic guitar. On the smoldering “Rave On,” Leisz fingerpicks a tenor guitar in accompaniment to Bergquist’s hypnotic strumming. On “Undamned,” one of the album’s many stand-

outs (which features Lucinda Williams on vocals), every squawk of the strings is left as exposed as the wrenching lyrics (“I’ve got a thousand lost songs / I’ve done a thousand things wrong”).

Over the Rhine’s complex lyrics aren’t just poetic (“I sing the bebop apocalypse / I wrestle my angel / In smoky stage lights”); specific poems were the jumping-off points for some songs. “I feel some common ground between what I want my songs to do and what a good poem does,” Bergquist says. Detweiler keeps a folder of poems he says he can’t live without, including Adam Zagajewski’s “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” which inspired the last song on the album and the lines, “All my favorite people are broken / Believe me / My heart should know.”

Over the Rhine’s gutsiness in “letting go of expectations and staying open,” is apparent in lyrics that create from the broken fragments of life and love a tribute to resilience and hope as well as an expansion of the boundaries of their music. “Joe had referenced only one recording before we started working on *The Long Surrender*,” Detweiler says, “and that was Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks*. He said that the songs were quite traditional in nature, but the ‘seams had been blown out.’ That became a call to arms for Karin and me. We were going to California to blow the seams out of our songs.” **AC**

Céline Keating is a writer and editor living in New York City. She regularly reviews albums for Acoustic Guitar and other magazines and studies classical guitar.



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WHAT THEY PLAY

- **ACOUSTIC GUITARS:** The duo’s primary acoustic is a Lowden O-32 with a Sitka spruce top and rosewood back and sides. In concert Bergquist sometimes uses a Lowden O-25c (cedar top and rosewood back and sides). Both guitars are jumbo size and tuned one whole step lower than standard tuning (D G C F A D). They also used Joe Henry’s 1953 Gibson CF-100 for the song “Undamned” on *The Long Surrender*.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Fishman Acoustic Matrix Natural 1 pickup in the Lowden O-32 and Fishman Ellipse Blend in the O-25c. Detweiler uses a Fishman preamp/DI and Bergquist uses a Radial JD1 direct box.
- **STRINGS:** Ernie Ball Earthwood medium-gauge.
- **CAPO:** Brass 12-string Shubb.
- **PICKS:** Jim Dunlop USA nylon .73 mm.

