



## INTRODUCING: ALASTAIR PENMAN

**ENGINEER-TURNED-SAXOPHONIST ALASTAIR PENMAN UNPACKS THE ELECTRONIC PROCESSES DRIVING HIS NEW EP *DO YOU HEAR ME?* AND SHARES THE NEW VIDEOS THAT ACCOMPANY THE PROJECT**

**V**ariety has always appealed to me. Growing up, I wanted to do everything that my older brother and sister were doing, whether it was playing sport, playing music or any number of other activities. I also had wide-ranging interests academically – for my undergraduate degree, I studied engineering at Cambridge, which was a somewhat unusual starting point for my career as a classical saxophonist.

Owing to my broad range of interests, I enjoy the challenge of combining different ideas and disciplines. This is perhaps most apparent in my new EP, *Do You Hear Me?*, which is a melting pot of genres from contemporary classical and jazz through to commercial styles, incorporating a blend of acoustic and electronic instruments. The EP carries

an important message about the damage that we are doing to our planet, and the music has been combined with videography to increase its impact.

It wasn't until I had graduated from Cambridge and begun a master's degree at the Royal Northern College of Music that I started composing using electronics. I had been interested in music technology for some time, but I had previously used electronic effects more as a gimmick than a serious compositional tool. I sought out existing repertoire using electronics, but much of it felt like karaoke to a backing track, or else was rather esoteric.

But then my teacher at the time, Rob Buckland, encouraged me to write and submit a concert proposal where I described the type of music I





**Above: A still from  
*Our House is On  
Fire*, from the *Do  
You Hear Me?* EP**

would like to hear (ignoring the fact it didn't exist yet). The proposal was accepted, so I had to rapidly get to work writing the music I had described, which was both a compositional and technological challenge! The resulting work for saxophone, acoustic guitar and electronics made extensive use of harmonisers, delays, reverbs and loops. It later formed the basis of my first album, *Electric Dawn*.

Beginning to compose with electronics was a steep learning curve, but I found it incredibly rewarding: it is an area that I would encourage all musicians – however technophobic – to explore.

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When you begin working with electronics, you inevitably learn a lot more about recording and production techniques, which are invaluable tools for musicians. In the current climate, where many performances are on hold, if you are able to make high quality recordings or livestream performances, you are instantly at a substantial advantage.

The technology available for working with electronics is improving at an exponential rate and is becoming much more accessible in terms of both cost and ease of use. If you own a computer, you already have half the gear you need to make your own recordings and begin experimenting. One of my initial concerns was whether it would be

possible to achieve seamless interaction between electronics and acoustic instruments, such that the electronics would enhance and augment the acoustic sounds rather than distract from them. One of the first pieces I wrote incorporating electronics is *Sandbox*. In the opening section I tried to emulate the sound of a saxophone with a sustain pedal, similar to that on a piano. This opened up a rich new sound-world, quite different to what you might expect from a saxophone – it is this kind of exploration that really excites me and pushes the boundaries of both what is expected and what is possible.

While I have been incorporating electronics into my work for some time, *Do You Hear Me?* is one of my first works with a clear political message. The driving force behind the EP was a feeling of helplessness about the climate crisis. Our planet is dying, but what can we do to prevent this? The science is not new, but major corporations – from fossil fuel companies to the agriculture industry – have been covering up the impacts of their environmentally damaging activities for decades, purely to protect their profits. Sadly, many governments have been complicit in this deceit. Only through public pressure on governments and industries will we be able to effect the changes that are needed to prevent catastrophic environmental destruction.

Some argue that artists should not bring politics into their work, but I believe that the most honest work an artist can do is to convey a message they really believe in. Artists should be championing important



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causes and encouraging positive changes in the world through their work. How can a musician truly perform with feeling if they do not believe in the work they are presenting, or if they are trying to suppress their true emotions?

*Do You Hear Me?* is the first project for which I have commissioned videos – in this case, from the brilliant videographer Tom Gimson. As music is increasingly consumed online, adding video is a great way to bring in an extra dimension. Also, collaborating with other artists always brings more ideas to the table and can really lift a project.

Similar to the use of electronics, it is becoming easier and easier to create your own videos. You can easily experiment without great expense. For this project it made perfect sense – the videos accompanying the music illustrate the scale of the damage that we are doing to our planet and

encourage people to take action.

So, what is the point I am trying to make? I believe that musicians should experiment with new technology, embrace interdisciplinary collaboration and be true to themselves in presenting music they believe in, in order to highlight issues that they are passionate about. Not only will this lead to new and exciting projects, but also to personal fulfilment and a meaningful connection with the audience.

*Alastair Penman's new EP Do You Hear Me? Is out 18 December on Sospiro Records. You can watch the video for Penman's [new track here](#).*



Right: Alastair Penman performing live

