

DO YOU HEAR ME?

Alastair Penman writes about the inspiration for his new EP and the process behind its creation

Our planet is dying. Not a day goes by without a news report on events that are occurring as a result of the climate catastrophe. Weather patterns are changing, glaciers are melting, wildfires are breaking out, and we are in the grip of a global pandemic. All of these are unquestionably interlinked, and no sane person questions whether climate change is real. The only questions are how long we can survive its effects and how long we have to act before it is too late to prevent irreversible changes.

Within the arts world there is a longstanding tradition of tackling difficult subjects, raising awareness of important issues and even pushing political agendas. I make no apologies for the fact that this is exactly what my new EP, *Do you hear me?*, intends to do.

Research has shown that although lifestyle changes are important, the most effective way for an individual to help tackle climate change is to donate to effective climate charities. I will therefore be donating 50 percent of the proceeds from the EP to two of the most effective charities fighting climate change: Clean Air Task Force and Coalition for Rainforest Nations.

This project has had a long incubation period, and during this time the climate emergency has only intensified. The situation has not been aided by politicians, who pay lip service to the climate emergency but have failed to implement any real changes or set ambitious targets. Profits and self-interest continue to be at the heart of both government and business; until we see a global change in our political and economic systems, these vested interests will continue to prevent any real progress towards a sustainable economy.

Ignorant Complicity was the first piece I composed to convey a clear message, aiming to prompt people to question their everyday choices and the status quo. The original version of this piece (for alto saxophone and piano) was commissioned by the Park Lane Group and RVW Trust and premiered by pianist Edward Liddall and me at St John's Smith Square in April 2017.

Before performing the piece, I made a speech highlighting the everyday atrocities carried out by the meat and dairy industries and highlighting some of the immensely cruel processes that are commonplace within the industry.

After the concert I was approached by an audience member, who asked if I felt a hypocrite because I was wearing leather shoes and a leather belt while advocating against animal cruelty. I had to point out that both my shoes and belt were synthetic.

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The fact that he was unable to tell this served to illustrate the point that there is no need to kill animals for our clothing; synthetic alternatives not only look the same, but they have a lower environmental impact and do not cause animal suffering.

Fast forward three years: veganism is rising exponentially in the western world, and the younger generation is becoming increasingly vocal about climate issues thanks to the activism of groups including Extinction Rebellion and advocates such as Greta Thunberg. However, climate change is not a new problem. As far back as 1896, the Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius proposed that by burning fossil fuels, humans were adding carbon dioxide into the atmosphere which would in turn raise the planet's average temperature – the greenhouse effect.

Throughout the 20th century, scientists published data indicating that human activities were indeed causing global

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warming, and in 1988, an international group of scientists warned that the world should take active steps to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Why was no action taken, and why do we still see only token gestures from governments towards this goal? Unfortunately, money really does make the world go round, and oil and gas companies have funnelled huge sums of money into concealing the true scale of climate change, producing research designed to deliberately cause confusion and obscure the facts. Due to their enormous funds and lobbying power, these industries have also successfully prevented governments from bringing in legislation to try to prevent climate change – all to protect their profits.

If we have failed to act for 30 years since the first clear warning from scientists, what hope do we have now, in the middle of a global pandemic and racing headlong towards the destruction of our planet? Our individual choices might feel like a drop in the ocean, but by making conscious decisions in our daily lives, we can catalyse positive changes in the world rather than engraining the current failing system. Businesses respond to consumer demand, so if we stop buying plastic, turn away from fast fashion and reduce (or better still, eliminate) meat and dairy consumption, businesses will have no choice but to respond – this is already becoming evident on our high streets. We can all play our part by reducing our travel, choosing green energy suppliers and shopping locally. In addition, we must vote for politicians who have a real desire to halt climate change rather than making empty promises and shirking their responsibilities.

In the creation of *Do you hear me?* I have had the pleasure of working with a number of fantastic creatives, and it has been a steep learning curve managing the process of recording and releasing an EP and its accompanying videos. Having worked with John Harle on my debut album, *Electric Dawn*, I was delighted that he agreed to produce *Do you hear me?*. In fact, it was John who suggested commissioning videos to increase each track's impact and help convey their messages. When considering who to commission to create the videos, one name sprang to both of our minds – Tom Gimson. Having worked with Tom before and with his background as a saxophonist as well as a videographer, we both knew that Tom was the perfect candidate for the job.

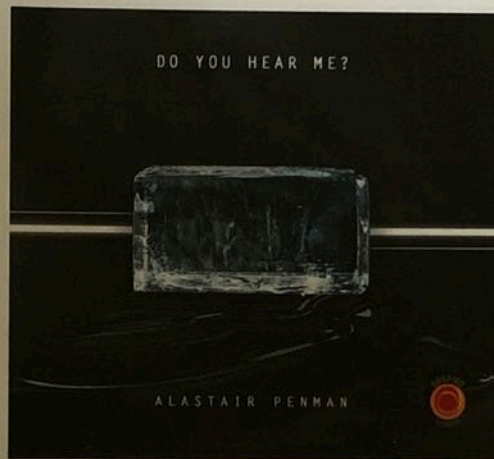
Much of the initial work was done in my own home studio, where I composed all of the music and created initial demos of the tracks. Having a background in computer engineering,

I have a strong interest in the combination of electronic and acoustic music; the music presented here exemplifies this, with the saxophone sound processed through numerous effects and set against synthesisers and electronic soundscapes. Once I had demos of all the tracks and they were ready to be recorded, I enlisted the help of Roland Heap, an exceptional audio engineer who also recorded my album *Electric Dawn*.

Trying to record and release an EP during lockdown was not without its trials and tribulations. A few days before we were due to record (July), I had a call from Roland to say he had fallen ill with possible coronavirus. This meant that unfortunately Roland had to close his studio until he received the result of a SARS-CoV-2 test. Fortunately, the illness turned out not to be coronavirus; however, Roland was unwell for the best part of a week, with the knock-on effect being a delay to the recording dates of about a fortnight. Luckily, one thing I learned from my previous release is to always allow plenty of slack for unexpected mishaps! After the recording, I spent a couple of days mixing the tracks with Roland at his studio before we passed the recordings on to John Harle for further mixing and a sprinkling of his production magic. Finally, the tracks were

synchronised with the amazing videos that Tom had created.

Having never commissioned videos before, I found it hugely exciting to see Tom take my briefs and add his own creative touch to bring each of the tracks to life. I gave Tom complete free rein on the final track, *Change is Coming*, which resulted in him ordering a huge block of ice which he filmed melting over the period of a day, to create



mesmerising footage synonymous with melting ice caps. The fact that Tom is himself an excellent musician meant that the videos are completely in tune with the music, and I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome. (You can check out more of Tom's work at tomgimson.com)

The resulting EP contains four tracks with accompanying videos: 'Do you hear me?', 'Our House is on Fire', 'Ignorant Complicity' and 'Change is Coming'. Each track reflects on a different aspect of the climate emergency, with the accompanying videos supplying both gripping imagery and impactful statistics. The music features the full range of saxophones from soprano through to baritone, as well as clarinet, bass clarinet and numerous synthesisers. The EP is supported by a website, doyouhear.me/info, which provides more information about what you can do as an individual to help tackle climate change. It also provides references for all of the facts mentioned in the videos and hosts the videos themselves.

I would not have been able to produce this EP without the support of a number of individuals, to whom I am exceptionally grateful. It is an unfortunate sign of the times that there is limited money to be made by musicians creating music outside of the mainstream, especially during the ongoing pandemic, so I feel privileged to be able to create the music that I believe in and share the messages that need to be heard. ■

The title track of the EP, 'Did you hear me?', will be released on Sospiro Records on 11 December, with the full EP released on 18 December. It is available to purchase from doyouhear.me/info as well as all the usual streaming services and record stores.