

Caleb Burhans - Past Lives (2019)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 27 May 2019 15:16 -

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1 *A Moment for Jason Molina* 9:28 2 *Contritus* 14:53 3 *Once In A Blue Moon* 12:38 4 *Early Music (For A Saturday)* 4:57 Electric Guitar – Simon Jermyn (1) Ensemble – JACK Quartet: (2) Cello – Kevin McFarland Viola – John Pickford Richards Violin – Ari Streisfeld, Chris Otto Ensemble – Duo Harpverk: (3) Harp – Katie Buckley Marimba – Frank Aarnink Electric Bass, Violin [Electric], Tape [Delay] – Caleb Burhans (4)

New York composer and multi-instrumentalist Caleb Burhans is a man of contrasts. He's a self-described agnostic with a passion for sacred music (he has a history of singing in church choirs). He's a composer who creates noncommercial music for his own projects, but has worked with popular comics of late-night TV (including Stephen Colbert and David Letterman). And, as a musician, he's been known to adapt his talents for any style, performing in orchestras, ambient ensembles, rock bands, and disco groups, among other settings.

All of those experiences (sans disco, perhaps) come into play on Burhans's latest album, *Past Lives*, a collection of four pieces from his decades-spanning catalog of works thematically centered around grief—not just as a response to death or failed relationships, but also to time, opportunity lost to addiction, and changing eras and identities (he wrote 2010's "Requiem for General Motors in Janesville, Wisconsin" after the auto plant in his hometown ceased production). But where his 2013 album *Evensong* mixes reverent choral vocals with lush orchestral arrangements, *Past Lives* is characterized by sparse, profoundly intimate instrumentals that feel more like a private mediation than communal ritual.

Co-produced with Grey McMurray, Burhans's collaborator in electro-acoustic duo itsnotyouitsme, the record does a lot within that context. Opener "A Moment for Jason Molina"—a tribute to the indie songwriter who passed away in 2013—features Simon Jermyn on guitar and recalls some of the earthy, soul-stirring qualities of Molina's music. "Contritus,"

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performed by New York's JACK Quartet, channels a contemplative, cinematic rollercoaster of emotions. After a gentle marimba and harp performance on "Once in a Blue Moon," Burhans closes things out with "Early Music (for a Saturday)," merging stoic bass guitar and minimalist electronic blips into an interplanetary journey that slowly dissolves into the white light of the beyond.

In many faiths and traditions, mourning is viewed as an act for the living. Likewise, Past Lives doesn't just seek to honor departed friends or note a closing chapter of life, but to explore the unanswered questions and complex feelings of the bereaved. Though the moods might be sad, Burhans always provides plenty of space for reflection. And in times where personal tragedies often play out more publicly on a more massive scale than ever, this album feels like a gift.

---Jamie Ludwig, daily.bandcamp.com

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