

*Second Mansions*, the new album by Le Concorde, begins with sparkling chords that ascend as though trying to attain to celestial realms. It's an appropriate move for an album that, like the classic work of Catholic mysticism that inspired its title, St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, is a richly layered spiritual exploration of the architecture of the mind's journey to God.

To be sure, references to the ecstatic insights of a sixteenth-century saint are not what listeners ordinarily expect to find in a lush, exquisitely crafted, highly commercial pop album—let alone one created with legendary Scottish producer Calum Malcolm and a cast that includes some of the greatest studio session players of all time. But *Second Mansions*, which was three years in the making, is no ordinary album, and Stephen Becker, the singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist behind the Le Concorde name, has not traveled an ordinary path in music, work, or the spiritual life.

Becker originally conceived Le Concorde as a modern American counterpart to British artists of the Eighties genre known as sophistipop. Acts such as Prefab Sprout, Scritti Politti, and The Blue Nile labored to weave ornate soundscapes—intricate orchestrations of guitar and electronic counterpoint, which they married to soulful vocals and hyper-literate lyrics.

“I brought a copy of The Blue Nile's *A Walk Across the Rooftops* home with me from the public library one dark, dreary, Pacific Northwest day in 1985,” Becker recalls. “It was like stepping into a whole other world, and it changed my life.”

Becker grew up on an island near Seattle where he developed his guitar playing and love for synthesizers. By age twelve, he had formed a band and begun writing. A synth-pop act at his school was recording an album and pulled him in as a collaborator. Creating sounds and musical ideas on his Roland Juno 60, Stephen offered a musical track that was paired with lyrics written by classmate, Kevin Martin, future singer of Candlebox. This track would be his first recorded composition and first credited collaboration.

A taste for literature led Becker to do his undergraduate studies at a liberal-arts college in New England, where he also continued his unofficial studies in sophistipop as a DJ on the school's

radio station. His next stop was Northwestern University, outside Chicago, to study classical rhetoric and earn an MA and PhD in Communications Studies. It was a fine path for a creative soul who loved learning and wanted to plan for a stable career—but awkward for one who longed to devote himself more fully to music. “I lived a double life,” Becker admits. “I was an adjunct professor by day, and by night I was performing live and recording in studios.”

Eventually the tension became too much for him: “After I finished the doctorate, I fled academia. I didn’t have a deep passion for it like I had for music.” So he took a non-academic day job that enabled him to pour the better part of his energies into realizing his vision as a recording artist, under the name Le Concorde—a name intended to evoke the era of the music that most inspired him. The French-made Concorde jet was, as he puts it, “the pinnacle of 1980s luxury, international sophistication, sleekness, power, and technical prowess.” It was thus an apt analogy for what he sought to achieve with his musical project, namely “international collaboration, jewel-like attention to detail, and a sense of exhilaration.”

The collaborative aspect of Le Concorde holds particular importance for Becker. In each of his recording efforts, he has brought in top-tier guest personnel. On Le Concorde's eponymous 2004 debut EP, Becker’s collaborators included Psychedelic Furs’ John Ashton and Mars Williams, as well as engineer, Ed Tinley, known for his work with Smashing Pumpkins and Liz Phair.

Rock journalists were charmed by the *Le Concorde* EP. A writer for *Skratch* ’zine noted “a purity and innocence that subtly resonates through virtually every song.” At the end of 2004, Becker was encouraged to see the release make the *Village Voice*’s year-end Pazz & Jop critics’ poll.

Likewise, when Le Concorde’s first full-length album *Universe and Villa* followed in 2005 on March Records, listeners and critics picked up on the very things Becker had hoped they would appreciate. *PopMatters* awarded it Album of the Year recognition for 2005. *AllMusic* praised its “subtle undercurrent of mad glee,” calling it “grandly arranged—yet deceptively simple—metropolitan pop music.”

With *Suite* (2007), Becker moved to the label Le Grand Magistery and began a collaboration with producer David Gamson, the former keyboardist for Scritti Politti whose enormous résumé of hits include productions for Luther Vandross, Charli XCX, Kesha, Chaka Khan, and many others. They continued to work together on Le Concorde's widely praised follow-up *House* (2010) which gained spins on college-radio stations coast-to-coast and was selected by *AllMusic* as one of the Top 50 releases across all genres for November 2010. Yet, as *PopMatters* observed in a rare 9/10 review, beneath the album's "high production values," it was clear that Becker was contemplating matters deeper than the dancefloor: "*House* is also about a soul exploring, if not searching, over time and space, trying to find peace with change and trying to make change to find peace."

Indeed, for Becker, *House* marked a prelude to what he describes as the "life-altering spiritual journey" that led him to record his latest album. Initially he took time off from Le Concorde to work on other musical projects, including an as-yet-unreleased album with Jon Auer (The Posies, Big Star) and Brian Young (Ivy, Fountains of Wayne) as the power trio Unseen Beings. But increasingly he felt that something was missing from his life as a recording artist, and by 2019 he was contemplating leaving the music industry altogether. As he recalls, "More and more, the idea of writing pop songs about the dramas and ecstasies of romantic love was not adding up for me the way it did when I was younger, even though I was away from my Christian faith."

Seeking direction, Becker embarked upon an overseas trip that would answer his unspoken prayers beyond what he could have imagined. After staying with friends in Madrid, he found himself walking the cobblestone streets of Santiago de Compostela, the city in northern Spain best known as the destination for pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James).

"I was so inspired just walking down the ancient streets and beholding the great cathedral of St. James the Greater," Becker says. "In the most extraordinary and palpable way, I felt that the Apostle James himself was there with me, supercharging me. I opened my mouth and began singing in a street near the cathedral, and I had the first melodic line and lyric of what would lead to the

whole album.” The exuberance of that moment is captured in *Second Mansions*’ first single and video, “Saint James.”

Becker’s pilgrimage became a kind of spiritual centering point that helped the artist make sense of events before and after that seemed to call him back to Catholic faith—a faith in which he had been baptized and confirmed, but which he had wandered away from for decades. There was the taxi driver who suggested that he learn about St. Padre Pio, and the next-door neighbor who was downsizing his library and offered him books on orthodox Christian iconography and the history of early Christianity. Those encounters and many others led him to feel that God, through the Holy Spirit and the workings of divine providence, was revealing spiritual realities that had been beside him all along, only he had been too blind to see them.

“For a while in the beginning of my reversion journey,” Becker says, “I became like a character out of Philip K. Dick’s sci-fi novel *Valis*, a metaphysical detective on a mission set in the wild spiritual vortex of Southern California in a city called The Angels whose original name was ‘The Town of Our Lady of the Angels.’ Later, I came to see my return as that of a prodigal son, which entailed not so much me rediscovering Jesus but rather his coming out into the wild to find *me*.”

Becker found himself returning to prayer and the life of the sacraments. He also sought out and devoured literature on Catholic mysticism and the lives of saints. As he did, recording and performing regained its appeal for him, no longer as a mere hobby or even a career, but now as a means to reflect to the world the gifts of grace that he had received.

“Sophistipop seemed like such a natural fit for expressing the reality I felt I was seeing surrounding miracles and the divine supernatural,” Becker says. “I saw a connection between luxurious abundance and miracles that seemed to create the perfect link between the sophistipop style and the subject matter that I was now inspired to sing about. It was an answer to the problem that was stymieing me previously. Before, I wanted to make exhilarating, ecstatic, pop music but reached a dead end where romantic love no longer seemed to be adequate subject matter for expressing those energies. But now I was finding a love and pure joy that if anything

was *too big* for any music to capture it.” Even so, before he could do what was in his heart, he first had to discern whether the call he felt was genuine.

“I came before God honestly,” Becker says, “with my brokenness, aimlessness, humble talents, and equipment I’d accumulated over the years, and just surrendered all of it, offering to simply give it all up and look for a new role by which to serve. And it was as though God said, ‘It’s okay, I can work with that. Go forward, trust and you’ll know what to do.’” What followed was connecting with Calum Malcolm and experiencing an overflowing abundance of songs pouring out, unlike at any previous point in my life as a songwriter.”

To produce *Second Mansions*, Becker called upon acclaimed Scottish producer Calum Malcolm, who had helmed many of his favorite albums, including classic Eighties and Nineties recordings by The Blue Nile, Prefab Sprout, Aztec Camera, and Orange Juice. Malcolm is known for creating evocative, nuanced, audiophile-quality albums of lasting artistic value.

“Calum asked what I wanted to do,” Becker recalls, “and I told him point blank: ‘I want to make a great album.’ And I explained that I was very serious about this ambition and would need his commitment as well to strive for an album of the highest quality.”

Becker then demoed the full proposed album and additional songs, keeping the recordings extremely rudimentary even to the point of making several with an antiquated cassette four-track recorder with the aim of showcasing only the bare-bones songwriting. He then mailed cassettes off to Scotland.

What did the producer think of what he heard? “It’s songs first, sound second for me,” Malcolm says—and Becker’s songs did not disappoint. “‘Morning by Morning’—the way the chorus arrives—it’s so thoughtful and assured, I completely love it. When you get that feeling, I’m off! Stephen is clearly inspired by the early/mid-Eighties-era songwriting style and sound, and his demos are full of it.”

For Becker, Malcolm's enthusiasm was a signal grace, confirming him in his belief that God wanted the project to happen, even though it would take more effort than anything he had done up to that point. "Calum said he understood my vision," Becker says. "He told me, 'I can tell you know exactly what you're doing. And you've done it. Now we just need to record it.'"

Initially, Becker intended to travel to Edinburgh to record in Malcolm's studio, but the pandemic shutdown intervened. Instead, the artist and producer worked out a creative means of transatlantic collaboration. Each cut on the album began with Malcolm recording the rhythm tracks live at North Lodge studio in the Scottish countryside. Initially he worked with bass player Lewis Gordon (Deacon Blue) and drummer Ross McFarlane (The Proclaimers, Jon Fratelli), whose work is heard on most of *Second Mansions*' cuts. "Calum and I agreed that live recording of acoustic drums and electric bass should be a consistent part of the sound of the album," Becker says. "We wanted the album to pulse with human vitality in all the performances, especially at its core, which is the rhythm section."

Malcolm sent the completed rhythm tracks to Becker, who would divide his recording between two Los Angeles studios: the iconic Sunset Sound for vocals and guitar overdubs with **engineer/vocal producer** Cameron Lister (whose credits include Belle and Sebastian) and the vintage-synthesizer lab of **keyboardist** Roger Joseph Manning Jr. (Beck, Jellyfish), where much synth magic was made.

Eventually the cast of personnel grew to include a virtual Who's Who of rock, pop, and R&B studio greats, including **bass players** Pino Palladino (The Who, John Mayer Trio, Nine Inch Nails) and Vinzenz Benjamin (ABC, Paul Young); **guitarists** Paul Jackson Jr. (Michael Jackson, Daft Punk's "Get Lucky") and Jamie West-Oram (The Fixx); **drummers** Liam Bradley (Van Morrison, The Blue Nile) and Ash Soan (Seal, Trevor Horn), and **backing vocalists/arrangers** Eric Troyer (Scritti Politti, Meatloaf, Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl") and Jon Auer and Ken Stringfellow (The Posies, Big Star).

Becker also called on Auer to play guitar alongside him on the track "Saint Jude." Auer says the songs on the album reflect the precision-minded approach that he has admired in Becker's work

ever since he first heard Le Concorde's *House*: "Life is all about your perspective and I find there are two types of people: those who believe the devil is in the details or those who believe it's God. I tend to believe that God's in the details, and I think Stephen's a God-is-in-the-details type, too."

Auer's observation comports beautifully with Becker's own experience of recording the album, which took three years of full-time work. "Making *Second Mansions* was a task that was about more than just me," he says. "In the past, I made the mistake of believing I was the center of my own creative work. This time around during the recording and writing, to borrow Quincy Jones's expression, I wanted to 'leave space for God to walk through the room.' Despite my imperfections at every level, I wanted to try and keep my attention on what draws us towards the good, the true, and the ecstatically beautiful, even as we struggle in life through darkness, deception, and chaos."

Many of the songs on *Second Mansions* are inspired by Becker's reflections on sophistipop classics that pointed to goodness, truth, and beauty—what philosophers call the transcendental properties of being—but stopped short of identifying their divine source. OMD's "Joan of Arc," Danny Wilson's "Mary's Prayer," China Crisis' "Sweet Charity in Adoration," The Blue Nile's "St. Catherine's Day," Simple Minds' "Sanctify Yourself," and many other Eighties hits were penned by God-haunted Scottish and English Catholics, who at times cloaked their religious references in boy/girl vaguery.

In contrast, Becker chose to lift the veil and write openly about the saints and the Savior whose love put a new song into his heart. So his "Memorare," unlike the Danny Wilson song, is a true Marian prayer, naming Mary by many of her titles and qualities—Our Lady of Guadalupe, *Stella Mare* (Italian for "Star of the Sea"), Maria, Queen, a woman "clothed with the stars and the sun." And when he does sing about boy/girl love, as on "Morning By Morning" or "Time Ticking Away" he brings to it a vision of couples in exile in the worldly time continuum, surrounded by their guardian angels and holy intercessors. They taste perhaps a scintillation of the eternity that lies ahead for them in heaven, while on earth they sense "time running like wild horses" and "one year [that] is only seconds."

Indeed, God is in the details of *Second Mansions*. Listen, be blessed, and—as they would say in the Eighties—don't forget to dance.

**Dawn Eden Goldstein**

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