

## **Roger Joseph Manning Jr. on Stephen Becker and the *Second Mansions* Sessions**

**(Interview and Transcription by Dawn Eden Goldstein, 2024)**

### ***Discovering Le Concorde's sound: "I was a kid in a candy store!"***

My friend Jonathan Auer of Posies fame and Stephen have been friends for a while. So, when Stephen was interested in trying to get some more keyboard action happening on the [*Second Mansions*] record, Jonathan threw my name in the hat.

Jonathan is very aware of my tastes and preferences and what motivates me. He said, "Hey, Stephen's got this project. It's very reminiscent of a lot of Eighties British pop that I think you're gonna love, especially Prefab Sprout."

Now, Prefab Sprout is not only sacred to me but was very much a driving inspiration to my partner, Andy, and me during the Jellyfish years. I introduced Andy to that band in the late Eighties, and I would argue he became an even bigger fan of them than me. We were in awe of them.

When somebody says, "We're inspired by Prefab Sprout," the potential exists for cynicism: "OK, you can say that, but do you really understand their DNA and their unique contribution from a musical standpoint?" While they did have success in a pop forum, especially in Europe, they were completely going by their own rules and rewriting the book.

So I had some skepticism if Stephen's music was all that Jonathan was claiming it to be. And the pleasant surprise was that it, in fact, was. I was in shock that somebody who I didn't know about, let alone an American, really seemed to have studied that British musical literature, so to speak.

What was more, I saw that Stephen did, with his writing, the most difficult thing to do, which is when you're inspired by something and then, instead of just copying it, you make it your own. I'd like to think that's what me and my collaborators have done over the years, because we make no apologies about our influences and what inspires us. But it's a very challenging thing for a writer to do.

And as I got to know Stephen's music—and I got to know it intimately, getting into its musicology and architecture—I found that his ear is incredible. It's very advanced, and it shows that he spent a lot of time with this genre of music, which is also near and dear to my heart. You don't run into many Americans who know this stuff!

So I couldn't have been more surprised when Stephen presented this material to me. He wanted me to help him decorate it with keyboards. Well, I was a kid in a candy store! Along with jazz, this sophistipop is the music that inspired me in high school. It was loaded with synthesizers and the keyboard technology of the late Seventies and the early Eighties—bands like Tears for Fears, Peter Gabriel, Scritti Politti—very keyboard-driven, because people were having fun with the technology at the time.

I was, like, "Wait, Stephen is writing these types of songs, these types of melodies and chords, *and* he wants me to use my keyboard skillsets from a bygone era." I just couldn't believe it!

What Stephen wanted was also a type of music that is more authentic for me. I've been very blessed in the amount of freelance work that I've had on people's projects over the years—some very famous, a lot not-so-famous. But the fact of the matter is, the percentage of music that I've played on where I'm actually inspired, honored to be doing it—it's not very large. I enjoy the jigsaw puzzle of the producer and the artist together cracking the code—how can I help you to get the sound you need? But artistically, and as a fellow songwriter, I'm normally not very interested in, say, the pop-rock music, with lots of hip-hop infused, of the last twenty years.

Stephen walks in, and I'm expecting that type of music. Instead, he's asking me to do everything that I got into the music business to do. Here's a guy that lives in Los Angeles, he doesn't live too far away from me, we share other similar interests, we're in the same age group—how come I'm just meeting this guy now? We probably could have made three records at this point!

***An unusual spiritual connection: “It was refreshing to have Stephen open up”***

About 2017 or 2018, my parents, who are lifelong Catholics, got to realize a dream of my mother's later years, which was to do the Camino walk through Spain. They both completed a surprisingly large portion of that walk, and they sent me back a few little mementos from the walk, including a little shell, which apparently is an emblem and an icon of the walk. I've had it hanging in my studio.

When Stephen visited my studio for the first time, he saw that shell from across the room and he said, “I've got to ask you, does that have anything to do with the Camino of St. James?”

I said, “Well, I think it does.”

So he started elaborating on the religious components of the music that we had been working on. I appreciated him opening up. Particularly with music that I like, I'm fascinated by what inspires the artist to come up with this stuff. Stephen had no idea of my religious convictions or lack thereof, or my spirituality, and yet he was putting himself out there, because he felt safe, which was flattering. His doing that enabled me to open up as well so that we could discuss convictions that we share, and some that we don't share.

That kind of connection has not happened with 95 percent of the clients I've worked for. And it's usually because that's not what we're all there for. But the fact of the matter is, no matter who the artist is, we're dealing with the alchemy of emotions.

Whether I'm adding some keyboards, or they're telling me about what their goals are for the song—whatever it is, you start getting into what's motivated you. Did your heart break, and you cried into this song? Or is this song a celebration of some joy in your life, or every emotion in between? At the end of the day, if what I'm doing and what the other musicians are doing aren't conveying that emotion, then we're failing for the songwriter.

Some people are just willing to be open and bare their soul onstage, and, in the rest of their life they're super private. And that's fine. But for me, especially when I'm collaborating, whether it's in my old band Jellyfish, or working with Beck, or doing session work, if there's not an element of us being real, open, and honest—being able to hear the word “no,” or “that doesn't work for me,” or “that reminds me of something I don't like,” and trying to keep ego out of the picture—it's just, like, we're all here to serve the song. So it would help me to know what drives you. How did you get here?

One of Beck's most famous and enduring records came from a pretty big, emotional, relationship breakup in his life. Well, believe me, me and all his backup band on that record, we all knew the

woman he was talking about. Each of us had our own friendly relationship with her. So we related to what he was bringing to the table in a way that a lot of other musicians would not have, and I guarantee you that it affected how we contributed to his songs. That's why it was refreshing to have Stephen open up as he did at a time when we barely knew each other.

***Working to bridge rock and jazz “in clever and interesting ways”***

When I recorded keyboards for tracks on *Second Mansions*, Stephen was present in the room, but he wasn't physically playing anything. I think the whole point of bringing me in was to let me do what my ears heard. That mostly works when the collaborators are drawing from the same pool of resources and inspiration. I think he understood that right away.

In the studio with Stephen, I would play what I was hearing in the moment, and then he would just rein me in. He would say, “I love how you're approaching the verse, but I wish, as we're approaching the chorus, you could build it up more, maybe go up higher on the keyboard or add more tension in your chord voices, so that, come the chorus, it releases more and it gets more pleasant and happy”—those types of things. Without him really knowing what the hell I was doing, his ear was sophisticated enough that he could comment intelligently about it.

That's really the optimal kind of situation: stay out of my way, but provide the guardrails, because you're the composer. You should know what the guardrails are.

The thing about Stephen's music and that genre in general, a lot of the harmonic content, whether the artist is aware of it or not, is rooted in jazz and advanced chordal harmony. He's basically writing jazz voices and jazz chords, but they don't sound jazzy necessarily in a pop-rock setting like that. For me, that's part of the appeal, because I grew up on rock and I grew up on jazz. I like

when they combine in clever and interesting ways. So it was fun to see him doing that in his music.

All of that tickled my fancy. I was excited. It took me back to my teenage years, when I would sit in my room and try to figure out the songs that my favorite artists were doing. Rooms in my musical psyche that had been closed or lying dormant were suddenly reawakened—“Oh, I know what to do here!” And I realized, “Yeah, because this is all you did in the Eighties,”

So, on a personal level, recording *Second Mansions* felt like time travel. But it doesn't sound to me like some kind of new-wave Eighties throwback record. Stephen's done a really good job in putting his own stamp on it.