

FEATURES

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A four-track guy in a digital world

Indie singer-songwriter and guitarist Matt Ward doesn't hide his nostalgic leanings, or his taste for the homemade

BY MELENA RYZIK
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, PORTLAND, OREGON



Indie musician Matt Ward poses at the Delta Cafe in Portland, Oregon. Stereogum.com editor Amrit Singh named Ward's new album *Hold Time* one of the most anticipated albums of the year.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

There is a century-old house in the southeast section of this city, with an attic full of vintage instruments and audio equipment and a drum kit in the dining room, and this is where the indie musician M. Ward likes to record. Reel-to-reel tapes are stacked on the linoleum floor upstairs; a broken film projector with an old coil speaker serves as an amplifier; bells and shakers crowd a shelf in a studio lit mostly by Christmas lights; the Wurlitzer gets a lot of use.

Ward — the initial stands for Matt — is a connoisseur of the old-fashioned, like the Japanese-made circa-1970 Epiphone guitar that Mike Coykendall, the owner of the house and one of Ward's longtime producers, handed him to strum.

"Want to see Matt's favorite microphone?" Coykendall, a genial man with long silver hair and excitable eyebrows, said, producing something out of date. "Be very careful with it, it probably cost US\$2."

Ward, 35, a singer-songwriter and guitarist, doesn't hide his nostalgia, or his taste for the homemade. "I don't like expensive sounds," he said. "I'm still using the same four-track I bought when I was 15 to write songs." That retro-crafting is evident in his sixth studio album, *Hold Time*, which will be released by Merge Records tomorrow. About half the songs were produced in this house. Like his previous work, it is indie folk with some pop glimmer and more country pluck, and a roster of starchy collaborators, like Lucinda Williams and his partner in the duo She & Him, the actress Zoëy Deschanel, who sings backup on the peppy, toe-tapping single *Never Had Nobody Like You*.

"The blogosphere will eat this track up," the editor Amrit Singh wrote on Stereogum.com, the influential music blog, which also named *Hold Time* one of the most anticipated albums of the year. It has been streamed more than 100,000 times in the last month on National Public Radio.

It was also in this house that Ward recorded most of She & Him's debut, *Volume One*. Released last year by Merge, it was his biggest hit, selling more than 120,000 copies and winning his solo act new fans. He will play the Apollo Theater in Harlem on Thursday and, for the first time under his own name, the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California, in April.

"She & Him definitely broadened the number of people who would hear Matt's new record," said Mac McCaughan, a founder of Merge. But even before that project, "this would have been our biggest release in the first half of this year," he added. "His last record sold more than 60,000 copies. For us that's a huge record."

For Ward that success has been a slow and steady build. In the decade since he moved to Portland to record his first album, he has supported himself through music — a reflection of the city's livability as well as his

career as a sideman. Something of a musician's musician, Ward has performed as a slide guitarist with members of Calexico in Europe, as an orchestral player for Bright Eyes in concert and on TV, and at Madison Square Garden with Norah Jones. His other collaborations on the road and in the studio read like a Who's Who of the indie-love firmament: Jenny Lewis, Cat Power, Neko Case, the White Stripes. In addition to She & Him's *Volume Two*, among his next projects is Monsters of Folk, an album with Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes and Jim James of My Morning Jacket.

"I think our voices and spirits blend well together. When we played together, it just felt natural," James wrote in an e-mail message. "His music is eternal and people will be listening to it as long as they have ears."

Through it all Ward has maintained his own distinctive style, built equally on his croaky, plaintive voice, his fingerpicking musicality and his throwback aesthetic sense. He doesn't listen to much contemporary music or read newer books. He watches movies, but as for TV, he said, "I've never taken the plunge, except for *Twin Peaks*."

It's not that he's a Luddite — he buys songs on iTunes and does late-night YouTube like everyone else — or a misanthrope who believes that art was better in someone else's day. "I know there's great stuff out there," he said. "But I don't want to be influenced by stuff that's going on around me. I'm more interested in consuming stuff that's stood the test of time and the hard work of filtering has already happened."

Is he just a little bit lazy? "I think lazy isn't too far off," he said. Even so, Ward is not out of step; contemporary indie music has caught up to his brand of revivalism. And he's more diverse than he lets on: He likes the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* and grew up, near Los Angeles, on KROQ, then home to British new wave and acts like Sonic Youth and Firehose from the punk label SST.

"Listening to something that's brand-new, I get a little bit excited about it," he said, mentioning Fleet Foxes, a young harmonizing Seattle band, as a recent discovery, though he doesn't yet own their album. "But I get more excited about stuff that's obviously weathered storms."

In concert he's not into working the crowd. "I've never said, 'Hello, Milwaukee!' or 'Put your hands in the air like you just don't care,'" he said. "It's not my world. I'm much more interested in finding some common ground with myself and the musicians onstage."

Ward's ability to cede the spotlight may be one reason he has managed to collaborate with so many star players and tour so consistently, both choices he called "no-brainers."

"I sincerely believe that he does not care how much attention he gets," James wrote. "He makes his records in his own quiet and beautiful way and he always will."

McCaughan, who is also the singer for the indie group Superchunk, said: "He's a patient artist. I think you have to be on board with growing gradually to make it happen. I think the way he makes records is indicative of that. He's not someone who just bangs out a record in a week. He works on stuff and goes back and thinks about it."

Though he is rarely hurried, Ward now has the luxury of having extra time. His recent success means he can build in more significant breaks between tours, be choosier about where and when he plays, and even turn down projects. What would he do if he weren't pursuing music?

"It's something I think about all the time," he said. "It's more of a question of what wouldn't I do than what would I do." A sabbatical, he said, is in his future, but not the near future.

"Is there a word that means weighted down, but not in a bad way?" he asked. "I'm weighted down with musical ideas that keep me writing and recording and doing my job."

[THE WEEKENDER]

Beijing opera's future stars live up to the hype

Technical problems marred an otherwise remarkable display by China's best young Beijing opera talent at Metropolitan Hall

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTERS

On Thursday the Beijing Beijing Opera Company's (北京京剧院) youth troupe opened a four-day series of performances at Taipei's Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台) designed to showcase the breadth and depth of its talent. The company, which is a focal point of China's efforts to revive Beijing opera performance at the highest level, performed to a packed house on its opening night, and the enthusiasm of the audience was palpable even before the curtain went up.

For its opening show, two very different pieces had been selected. The first was an excerpt titled *Fork in the Road* (三岔口), which featured Zhan Lei (詹磊), an upcoming star in young martial male roles. The excerpt, which presents a scene of an assassin attempting to kill a general at a highway inn, is designed to show off acrobatic and mime skills. The action takes place in a pitch-dark room — though the stage is brightly lit — and the two characters move around in perfectly choreographed confusion.

All this was done to a stripped-down percussion accompaniment and was a demonstration of the physical foundations on which more mature interpretive performances can be based. Strong stage presence and amazing skill allowed the two performers to hold the audience's rapt attention for the half hour segment in which there was only few minutes of introductory dialogue.

This was by way of an opener for the main event, a full production of *The Jewelry Pouch* (御膳囊) featuring youth troupe leader Chi Xiaoqiu (迟小秋). Once again, the performance was remarkable for its solid vocal and physical skills, but enjoyment was somewhat marred by the almost painful volume at which the sound reproduction equipment was set. Adjustments during the intermission removed the worst effects, but sadly, the definition of some of the more ornate vocal passages was lost in the distortion of the speakers. This technical problem aside, the quality of the performance was outstanding, with the solid foundation work for which the company is famous shining through. Though Chi was certainly the star of the show, the work of Xu Meng-ke (徐孟珂) as a comic maid was a remarkable demonstration of female impersonation and clowning.

While much opera in Taiwan is looking to find an outlet through integration with contemporary theater and theatrical design, it is refreshing to see a production of such proudly strident conservatism in which the performer was everything. There was never any danger of a costume designer or director stealing the spotlight. The audience was vociferous in its approval.

Dancer/choreographer Yeh Ming-hwa (葉名樺) found the right balance of precision and whimsy in her duet *Tightrope Walker* (走索人), performed as part of the Kaohsiung City Ballet's (高雄城市芭蕾舞團) Dance Shoe 2009 (2009點子鞋) at the Experimental Theater on Saturday. It may have been the shortest piece on the six-work program, but it was clearly the best.

Yeh and partner Kuo Chiu-miao (郭秋妙), dressed simply in a muted assortment of warm-up clothes, were crisp and clean, matching each other step for step whether on point or on the floor. Yeh also found the right balance between the pair work and each dancer's solos.

The other partnerships that worked well were the duet by former Cloud Gate dancer Janet Chang (張慈婷), *C&J's women* (C&J的女人), and Chang Ya-ting's (張雅婷) romantic pas de trios *A Lingering Reflection in the Eye* (留在瞳孔裡的影子). Both women danced in their own works, which was wonderful because they are terrific dancers, but they also showed a generosity as choreographers in allowing their partners to shine as well.

Such a balance was lacking in the other pieces. Chien Liang-che (簡良哲) showed a flair for drama in his *Variation* (戲), which clearly took a page from Matthew Bourne's male-focused *Swan Lake*, but his two fellow dancers lacked the technique to pull off their parts. Kao Hsin-yu (高辛毓) tried to cram too much into his *Moonlight* (月光), while Wang Kuo-chuen's (王國權) *Romantic Era* (浪漫時期) had some promising bits, but like the facemask that figured so proximately in the photo montages, ended up being more image than substance.

PLANET POP

Jennifer Hudson and Beyonce won major honors at the NAACP Image Awards on Thursday night, where *The Secret Life of Bees* was named best picture.

But both **Rihanna** and **Chris Brown** stayed away from the most prestigious African-American awards show of the year, which took place less than a week after Brown, 19, was arrested for making criminal threats against Rihanna, 20.

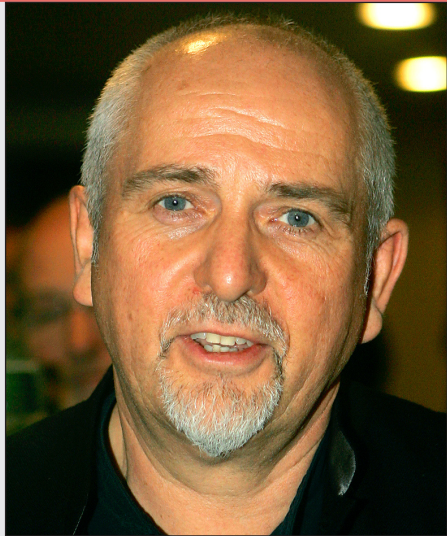
Will Smith and **Rosario Dawson** took the top actor and actress awards for *Seven Pounds*, while Hudson took home trophies for outstanding new artist, best album and best collaboration.

Beyonce was named best female artist and **Jamie Foxx** was best male artist. Rap mogul **Sean Combs** was named best TV actor for his role in *Raisin in the Sun*. *Shumdog Millionaire* won the prize for outstanding independent motion picture.

Meanwhile, new details emerged on Wednesday about Brown's alleged attack.

According to E! Online, Rihanna told police that her superstar boyfriend threatened to kill her and then choked her until she lost consciousness.

The glamorous young couple started fighting in Brown's rented Lamborghini following a star-studded pre-Grammy party late Saturday, Feb. 7. According to *OK* magazine, the tiff was sparked when Brown received a text message from another woman after reportedly flirting with **Paris Hilton** at the party.



Peter Gabriel plans on skipping the Oscars. PHOTO: AP

When Brown pulled over in a swanky Los Angeles neighborhood, Rihanna grabbed the car keys and threw them out the window, E! reported. After struggling to find the keys, Brown then wrapped his hands around his girlfriend's neck and screamed, "I'm going to kill you."

Rihanna reportedly told police she lost consciousness and woke up to find Brown gone. Police were called by a neighbor and took Rihanna to hospital in a squad car, where she was treated for a split lip, contusions on her forehead and bite marks on her arms.

Rihanna and Brown missed the

Grammy Awards ceremony on Sunday of last week, at which both had been scheduled to perform.

Brown was arrested on charges of making criminal threats and is free on US\$50,000 bail. Prosecutors have ordered police to continue their investigation into the incident, a sign that more serious charges are being weighed.

Peter Gabriel's minute in the Oscars spotlight will lack one important element: Peter Gabriel. The Academy Award-nominated singer won't perform at the Feb. 22 ceremony to protest an apparently revamped presentation of best original song contenders. Gabriel says in a video on his Web site that he objects to the songs being shortened to 65 seconds apiece and made part of a medley. **Gabriel** is nominated alongside **Thomas Newman** for *Down to Earth* from *WALL-E*.

"It's a bit unfortunate because the songwriters, even though they're a small part of the whole filmmaking process, we still work bloody hard and deserve a place in the ceremony as well," the 59-year-old singer said.

In other film news, director **Claudia Llosa's** *The Milk of Sorrow*, a movie that addresses the fears of women abused during Peru's turbulent recent history, won the Berlin film festival's top Golden Bear award.

The movie stars **Magaly Solier** as Fausta, a young woman suffering from

a mysterious illness that is said to be transferred through the milk of mothers who were raped or physically abused during Peruvian authorities' long war against leftist guerrillas. The Spanish-Peruvian co-production is Llosa's second feature film.

The festival's jury grand prize, which comes with a runner-up Silver Bear, was shared Saturday by two films. Argentine director **Adrian Biniez'** debut feature *Gigante* tells the story of a supermarket security guard who falls in love with a cleaner, while German director **Maren Ade's** *Everyone Else* follows a couple during a difficult vacation.

Iran's **Asghar Farhadi** was chosen as best director for *About Elly*, which looks at thirtysomething Iranians' attitudes to life.

Sotigui Kouyate was named best actor for his part in director **Rachid Bouchareb's** *London River*. He plays a French Muslim desperately awaiting news of his son after the 2005 terrorist attacks in London.

Birgit Minichmayr won the best actress honor for her role as half of the awkward couple in *Everyone Else*.

— AGENCIES



Rihanna and Chris Brown missed their second major awards ceremony in a week. PHOTO: AP