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A LOVE LETTER

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"This is a tough time for all of us, and we put it into our music," Sachal Vasandani, left, said of his new project with Romain Collin.



DAVE STAPLETON

Vasandani, Collin Explore Quiet Intensity

IN SPRING OF 2021, SACHAL VASANDANI (who was *DownBeat*'s 1999 collegiate vocalist of the year) and Grammy-nominated pianist-composer Romain Collin released *Midnight Shelter*, a pared-down, poignant collection of songs inspired by the pandemic's isolation. On July 15, the duo released *Still Life*, a sister project that continues to explore the timbre of life since March 2020.

"I feel like this music is intense ... in a quiet way," Vasandani said. "The truth is we're both calm and even-headed, but this is a tough time for all of us, and we put it into our music."

Years before this tough time, Vasandani and Collin met as many jazz-bred musicians in New York do — over a drink after being introduced by a mutual acquaintance, pianist Gerald Clayton. For a time, they were just friends who admired each other's work, but once Collin returned from an unexpectedly long stint in Iceland and COVID restrictions lessened in Summer 2020, Vasandani asked Collin to join him in the studio.

Midnight Shelter, the result of that encounter, seethed with the pain of the pandemic, and triumphed in the joy of reconnection. As COVID rages on in 2022, *Still Life* continues to lean into the subtle urgency unique to this time as it recontextualizes Vasandani's "No More Tears," which appeared on his acclaimed 2015 release *Slow Motion Miracles*, as well as long-beloved songs like Simon & Garfunkel's "Sound Of Silence," with a delicate use of jazz language.

A lyrical theme on the album is the idea of

missed connections — a disagreement between lovers, a missed train stop, a lack of light or understanding — and yet, the pair say they had no preconceived parameters when choosing songs for this record. They just dropped songs they liked into a shared playlist.

In that process, they found a lot of seemingly simple pop songs that they identified with emotionally. The challenge, then, was for Collin to see if there was enough for him to do with the song harmonically to keep it interesting and best support Vasandani, who he views as a storyteller.

"Sachal delivers songs in a way that is very much the feel of storytelling," Collin said. "If that's not there, if it's not honest to the core in terms of what story we're delivering, it just falls flat. And the song might be great, but I might not feel like [there's anything] to bring pianistically ... there's a very fine line between stripped-down and boring."

Vasandani, likewise, sees himself more as a bard in this duo than in other more straightforward, Sinatra-esque settings. He is quite exposed in this configuration and in pop music, the lyrical story is foregrounded.

"The record, it's not really about Romain, it's not about me, it's about the song," Vasandani said. "And that's distinct from jazz. It's not a question of what are the chords. It's not a question of what is the rhythm. It's — what are you serving? And in jazz, sometimes, it's not a bad thing, but we're serving our ... own flights of fancy, our own desire to improvise. But, in this case, the song is

the North Star."

Likewise, the simple harmonies in the songs demanded an emotional presence that felt uniquely challenging as compared with previous projects.

"You can use a lot of big words to talk to somebody, or you can just say, 'I love you,'" Collin said. "But if you say, 'I love you,' unless you say it a certain way, it just doesn't mean anything, you know? It's just three words as opposed to a whole paragraph to say how amazing you are. If you're going to stick to those three words, it better come from a very clear place in your heart and mind for it to hopefully be received in a moving and impactful way."

While *Still Life* is in some ways an ode to simplicity, it also embodies the emotional complexity and improvisational spirit of contemporary jazz. Vasandani, with his perceptive phrasing and unguarded delivery, rediscovers new soul in radio hits like James Bay's "Let It Go" and Billie Eilish's "I Love You." Likewise, Collin's playing often transcends the piano — becoming Elizabeth Cotten's left-handed guitar strumming pattern on "Freight Train."

In this way, *Still Life* casts the idea of jazz, a style that often silos itself from other styles of music, in a less rigid light — and it beguiles. As Vasandani said, "Explore all the tributaries to all the rivers to all the oceans that you want, but just do it with jazz in your boat. That'll make the whole experience that much richer."

—Alexa Peters