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Poetry is music to their ears

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Once upon a time, all poems were music.

But then, new technologies and new cultural activities arrived, and "musicians became specialists of this; poets became specialists of that."

The identity of "poetry as music" was broken in two, and never shall they be returned to their original form.



T.R. Hummer and Billy Cioffi

These are the thoughts of T.R. Hummer, poet and musician, who has, for some time, been pondering the subject of how poetry and music go together in this century's musical mix.

"All the contexts have changed, so that effecting a straightforward re-unification of the poet and the musician is as impossible as effecting a re-merger of the physician and the priest," he said.

For Hummer, the conversation about music and poetry was largely one way – between Hummer and himself – but then he met Billy Cioffi (or rather, Cioffi steamrolled into Hummer's life and wanted to know why academics didn't take song lyrics seriously).

It was a chance meeting in 2009 – "If there is such a thing as chance," Hummer says – that got them talking. Cioffi, a veteran of the Los Angeles music scene, had returned to school to study literature and was taking a class in creative nonfiction from Hummer's wife, Stephanie Downie.

Cioffi was writing about music, and since Hummer is a musician (he's played the saxophone since he was 9), Downie decided they should meet each other.

They did, and they discovered they are "sort of a chiasmus," Cioffi said – Hummer made his living by writing, but had music in his soul, and Cioffi was a professional musician who loved to read and write.

One conversation led to another, and another, and then to a song, a CD, and to something called AmeriCamera. More CDs are in the works, and, of course, the talk continues about the relationship of poetry and music.

So what is AmeriCamera?

It's a collaboration between musicians, with the focus on music, poetry, photography and video. Or, as Hummer said, "It is a community of musicians. It is a nexus of thought, of creative activity, of inventiveness.

"It is a conversation. It is an expression of the developing tradition that we call the United States of America, which means that it is also an expression of the music of the whole earth, which has arrived on these shores in repeated waves of hybridization. It is words, pictures, music. Most of all, AmeriCamera rocks."

Hummer and Cioffi came up with the name in a conversation, batting words around between them. American, of course, because of the focus on the music and poetry of this country. And camera, because the process is a snapshot of the present and future of melody and word.

AmeriCamera's first CD, "High Minded," features The Monte Carlos, an ensemble that consists of Cioffi on vocals and guitar; Mickey McGee on drums and percussion; Paul Darrow, keyboards; Olivier Zahm, bass; and Hummer on reeds.

The CD, which will be released within the next month, was recorded and engineered by Zahm, a 33-year-old Parisian native, at his Electric Lotus music studio in Phoenix. The group is working on second CD, and projects a third, Hummer said.

And, Cioffi and Hummer hope to develop their show of music/poetry as a full stage show. "We seek a college-university audience," Hummer said. "Literary people can hook onto it."

Hummer and Cioffi performed at the recent Desert Nights, Rising Stars writing conference sponsored by the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing (which supported the first CD with a grant), and they appeared at a poetry reading series at the Tempe Center for the Arts which, they said, "drew a large crowd."

They also performed to acclaim in the Tempe Center's Songwriters Show case series, with an 11-piece band backing them up. This performance was professionally recorded, and will be broadcast at a future date on Eight.

The forces that would put Hummer and Cioffi together began several years ago, when Cioffi's wife, Gwen, who was then an insurance executive, accepted a job in Scottsdale. The couple moved to Arizona, and Gwen's company soon folded.

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Rather than move back to Los Angeles, the Cioffis decided to stay in Scottsdale and enjoy a life of leisure. But chance again intervened. "We both like to read, and we went to the library and I saw a brochure on Scottsdale Community College's adult re-entry program, Cioffi said. "I started from scratch at SCC with English 101 and 102 and a communication class. I was thinking about going back into journalism, as I had been writing for various music mags. I just got hung up on English Lit and theory. I know I'm weird."

Cioffi enjoyed his classes at SCC so much that he transferred to ASU, earned his bachelor's degree, and now is completing his master's degree in English literature. He plans to study for a doctorate at ASU.

His 32-year music career included working as a studio musician, record producer and tour manager for such noted names as Chuck Berry, with whom he went to Japan, Russia and Europe, Bo Diddley, Ben E. King, Lesly Gore and The Turtles. "I had a great time. I loved doing it," he said.

Hummer, who grew up in Mississippi, earned his doctoral degree from the University of Utah and has taught at the University of Southern Mississippi, Kenyon College, Middlebury College and Virginia Commonwealth University, where he was also senior poet.

He is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry and essays, including "The Muse in the Machine: Essays on Poetry and the Anatomy of the Body Politic," "The Infinity Sessions," and "Bluegrass Wasteland: Selected Poems," and has edited such prestigious literary journals as The Kenyon Review, The New England Review and The Georgia Review.

Hummer also has played with a variety of groups and musicians, including Stefan Anderson of The Anderson Brothers, Bucky Barrett, The Skinner Brothers Band of Stillwater, Okla., and Richmond, Virginia's L'il Ronnie and the Grand Dukes.

Shortly after they met, Hummer and Cioffi decided to try to write a song together.

"Music taught me to be an artist," Hummer said. "For a decade or more I was writing poems about music. I wanted to reverse, and set poems to music. But that won't work – you have to set bits of poetry and pieces to music."

Cioffi added, "When a poet has his songs set to music they're usually folksy or beat. We wanted to explore that genre with other types of music, rock'n'roll, R & B, and literary in a broad sense.

Their first song was "Mississippi More or Less," which became a "model" for their collaboration. Hummer sent a song lyric based on his poetry to Cioffi, then the two discussed the words vis-à-vis Hummer's poetry, and finally, "Mississippi" was born.

Hummer said, "That was a breakthrough. I saw how lines and images from poems could be recombined into song lyrics."

For Cioffi, "Mississippi More or Less" represents the idea of "circularity," where an idea or image is viewed differently by each collaborator, based on his previous experience.

"For example, Terry grew up in Mississippi, and I was there for a week with the Poynter Sisters. The impressions I got of Mississippi were different from Terry's."

In a musical collaboration, Cioffi said, one person takes the role of audience and one the performer, then they switch as they pass the idea back and forth.

"As you throw it back to the other author in the room you maintain the circularity – what you're working on takes on its own life. It becomes a combination of the two interactions that are going on. Then it becomes independent of both of us, but it has both of us within it."

For the CD "High Minded," Hummer's reading of his own poetry is interspersed with the jointly written music. It's a dramatic contrast, one that reminds us that, even though cultural times have changed, there's still poetry in music.

For more information on AmeriCamera, go to www.americameraproject.com.

To hear a music sample, go to <http://electriclotuslabel.com/index.php/AmeriCamera>.

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