

# Microtut

On his latest album *Unlearned*, Australian singer-songwriter **Scott Matthew** chose 14 of his favourite songs by other artists and reinterpreted them. Marcel Hegetschweiler talked to him about pop songs, the balance between light and dark, refurbishing existing songs and faith.

## Scott, who are you?

My identity is made up of many things: a melancholy balladeer, a loving friend, a sentimental loner, a romantic lover, a curious observer, a happy extrovert and sometimes an Australian who simply enjoys a beer and a laugh.

**You were born in Queensland, Australia, but have lived in New York City for more than 15 years. In an interview with *Face Culture* in 2011 you said that your parents live 'in the bush'. How has growing up out bush shaped your relationship with the 'natural world'?**

Growing up in rural Australia gave me an appreciation for nature and the power of it. The Australian bush is a wonderfully beautiful place but can also be very dangerous. I was taught to respect, appreciate and have caution with it. The one big mistake we make is that we think we have power over nature and we don't. It's the opposite.

## Do you miss this place when you're in New York?

Yes. I can occasionally have a blinding realisation that living the way I do in this concrete, manmade madness is unnatural and I long for a simpler, slower, more connected existence. Even though there can be a lot of beauty here in the madness, I do crave the tranquillity of nature. I think it's about finding a balance between the two realities. For now, I have Central Park as my escape. If you use your imagination, you can trick yourself into believing you are in the countryside.

## How did you first fall in love with music and when did you decide to stake everything on this card?

Music was something that has always been part of my life. My father was playing the guitar and singing, playing records on the weekends. It was in my early teens that he taught me a few chords on the guitar and I hid in my room and taught myself rudimentary versions of songs by The Smiths. I don't think I ever decided to 'stake everything' on music. It was just something I loved to do. It was part of who I was and a way for me to connect to myself and the world around me. I've been lucky enough that, in some ways, it's become my vocation. Without it I would be lacking in

identity and purpose. It certainly is a cornerstone of who I am, but it's not everything I am.

## You've also said you find it hard to write good pop music. Can you define three ingredients of a good pop song?

The obvious answer is melody, lyrics and an honest intention. The less obvious answer is that it's still a mystery to me. It's that indefinable process that almost seems outside yourself. As if it wasn't from you or logic. For me, writing has never been academic. It's emotion only.

## Listening to your productions, one can't find many up-tempo tracks. Could you imagine ever doing a dance floor song?

Never say never. I could see any amount of different genres. To be honest I think that would take a collaboration with someone who shared a similar vision with me but from a different angle. Also, I'm not really into understanding technology, so I'd need that mind on my side to achieve that. I loved what Antony did with Hercules and Love Affair.

## How do you usually go about when starting on a new song? Does text or melody come first?

The process seems to change with each song. Generally, it will happen simultaneously. Pick up the instrument and just experiment with chords and melody. Usually words come soon after. It's almost like the chords and melody dictate the words. What words sound best with that combination, what vowel sounds flow better.

## What struck me when listening to *Unlearned* – and also your older productions – is this unrestrained sentimentality. When performing live, do you find it difficult to get into this mood when standing in front of hundreds of people in the audience chatting and drinking?

Strangely, I find it very easy to convey that side of me in front of people. It seems very natural and organic and not something I have to work on to get to a certain 'place'. Sometimes after a show I feel vulnerable, as if I may have shown very personal parts of myself, but then I have to remember that the whole intention is to do that and be proud of it. The main ingredient in making and performing music to me is honesty. To be fearless to show things that people try very hard in life not to show. To make it safe for myself, and anyone listening, to feel it in that moment. I live my life that way, but I must say I don't live in a place of sadness or sentimentality. I'm happy and love to laugh much of the time also.

**Your productions are all calm and unagitated. There's always enough time and space for words and melody to unfold. This is very soothing in our hectic times, where a**

To Feel it in That Moment  
by Marcel Hegetschweiler  
Photography: Michael Mann  
Collage: Mario Lombardo

## lot of musical productions are fast, rough and stagily. Do you sometimes struggle with the fast pace of our times?

Space and an unhurried sense of time are very important to me when it comes to making music. Simplicity allows for a purity that is raw and piercing. My intention with music has always been to not over-produce the sound. Less is more in my case. I can absolutely struggle with the pace and unnecessary stress of living in these times, especially in NYC. I do get to a point often where I shut down and hide. I will stay indoors for a few days, not answer the phone, go to cinemas and see two movies in one day as an escape. It's very needed. Otherwise my thoughts become scattered and my anxiety levels rise and depression will start.

## You mentioned you find it very important to achieve a balance between light and dark as a person and not to deny any part. Can you give our readers three tips how to get their balance right?

Not to be ashamed or deny the darker side of yourself. It's a vital part of you and, without it, you wouldn't have joy. It's also important to wallow in the darkness for then you become a victim. Self-indulgence isn't evolved. Music has a wonderful way of allowing a little healthy connection to your darker side. I always thought that listening to a sad song when feeling down is such better therapy than forcing happiness by listening to something upbeat. It can be the solace you need to feel better again. Like a friend who has a sympathetic ear.

**The press release to your new album, which consists of 14 of your favourite cover songs, reads: "The challenge is to gently remove preconception of what you have learned these songs to originally be." The idea of learning something and then forgetting all you've learned about it just to rediscover the thing itself again, or to discover a new approach, has occupied several philosophers and thinkers. When you consider the process of interpreting these 14 songs, which of these two metaphors do you prefer: Was it like furnishing an empty house, or building a new house around interior furnishings?**



That's a really beautiful question. The picture that came to mind was having a beautiful existing house complete with loads of ornate antiques. Then I come along and keep the house but refurbish it with furniture I had made myself from driftwood and things I had found through my life's journey. Raw, simple and beautiful, but keeping the portraits of the previous owners up on the wall.

## The overall theme of this current issue of DASH Magazine is 'Fluid Faith'. What comes into your mind when you hear these words?

That life / faith is malleable and ever turning and evolving. It can't be contained in a dam but rather must be a river that flows and eventually finds the ocean.

## Can you remember a situation in your life when your faith was fluid and, if so, how did you manage to make it solid again?

Making music and being able to perform it has been a way that I've gained faith in the world and its people in it. I doubt faith is ever solid apart from the fact that love is the only real thing we have. In all its forms, romantic and otherwise. I have a solid faith in that fact.