

Steve Swallow with Robert Creeley So There

Robert Creeley: voice; **Steve Kuhn:** piano; **Steve Swallow:** bass; **The Cikada String Quartet:** **Henrik Hannisdal:** violin; **Odd Hannisdal:** violin; **Marek Konstantynowicz:** viola; **Morten Hannisdal:** violoncello

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“Writing is the same as music. It’s in how you phrase it, how you hold back the note, bend it, shape it, and then release it. And what you don’t play is as important as what you do say.”-

Robert Creeley

Steve Swallow’s “So There” is a recording that began as a collaboration with Robert Creeley and became an *hommage* to the great American poet, who died in 2005 - before the project’s completion. It is more than a “jazz and poetry” disc. The structure of Swallow’s music derives from the structure of Creeley’s verse, and its rhythms are related to Creeley’s readings of his work. “I tried to get inside Bob’s breathing as he spoke the lines. Paradoxically, I think this has resulted in my most heartfelt and personal music.” A finely-focused amalgamation of words and music, with exceptional writing for string quartet, it also leaves expressive freedom for Swallow himself as soloist and for pianist Steve Kuhn, who gives one of the most comprehensive performances of his career. Both words and music trigger powerful associations, new layers of meanings opening with each listening.

Steve Swallow was immediately taken with Robert Creeley’s writing in the late 50s on encountering it in Donald Allen’s anthology ‘The New American Poetry’, a book which examined the work of young poets then challenging literary orthodoxy, the new line taking its impetus from the innovations of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. Already then, the clarity and the succinctness of Creeley’s poems made them stand out. Swallow first tried to put some of them to music in the early 1960s, but it was not until the late 1970s that he set a group of the poems, recording them on the album ‘Home’ (ECM, 1979) with Steve Kuhn, Lyle Mays, Dave Liebman and singer Sheila Jordan.

“Having made ‘Home’ I was keen to do more. Bob’s poems, throughout my life, have drawn me back to them again and again. His work runs astonishingly deep. I can focus on, say, ten seconds of his work, and the nuances of freezing an image and the coloration, and tension and resolution in so small an event just remains a mysterious and miraculous thing to me. I find myself going back, again and again, to it because there is so much there yet to know. The only other works that have compelled me to them in a similar way are the Bach Cello Suites. I have a similar ongoing relationship to them, I just can’t keep my hands off them. Exactly the same thing happens with Bob’s poems. They have always given me new information. Sometimes basic practical information. One of the reasons I originally addressed Bob’s poetry was because I knew that residing inside it there was a means of escaping the absolute inevitability of the eight-bar phrase”: the poems opened up new compositional routes...

Although Robert Creeley and Steve Swallow had known each other in the early 1970s when they were near-neighbours in California, it was Creeley’s enthusiasm for “Home” that led to closer collaboration. Getting the opportunity to listen to Creeley read his work on many

occasions, sometimes when sharing a stage, Swallow realised that “there was nuance in his phrasing when he read that I wasn’t getting when I looked at the poems on the page. And I wanted to go that extra distance.” Subsequently Swallow asked Creeley to read several dozen short poems and fragments onto the microphone at engineer Tom Mark’s studio The Make Believe Ballroom (site of many a WATT session)...

“Back when I’d first worked on Creeley’s stuff in the 1970s, I used to tack the pages on the upright piano and just stare at the poems until I could find lines of music to correspond with them. The process was similar this time. I’d listen again and again to Bob’s reading until I isolated a poem that resonated with me. I’d keep on listening until I’d uncovered the pulse and put a beats per minute value to it.”

Robert Creeley identified strongly with jazz and would often write his poems while listening to, for instance, Bud Powell. “He was a very informed listener whose listening experience went back further than mine did. After all, he was sitting in nightclubs in the 1940s, listening to Charlie Parker. So when I started to look at the mechanics of his poems I wasn’t altogether surprised to find pulses there, including pulses Bob didn’t know he’d put there.” Swallow had chosen poems for “Home” based upon their mechanics and how ‘singable’ they appeared to be. “When I looked at the pieces subsequently I was struck by the fact that I’d chosen love poems exclusively. On ‘So There’ there wasn’t the same unanimous focus on romance, but an ‘aural landscape’ did gradually emerge... and it kept suggesting string quartets to me.

“Carla (Bley) and I had been listening to a lot to string quartets anyway. Now I redoubled my effort and listened to acres and acres of Haydn, late Beethoven, Bartók and, especially, Shostakovich, and managed to scare myself seriously. But the poems took me gently by the hand and impelled me into this thing... The poems kept showing me how to approach this. Not just the rhythms implicit in Bob’s speech, but the colours and atmospheres implicit in the poems as well.”

In August 2005, four years after Creeley had put the poems on tape, Steve Swallow and pianist Steve Kuhn flew to Norway to complete the project, with the Cikada String Quartet at the Oslo Art Academy. ECM’s Manfred Eicher, who had produced “Home”, introduced Swallow to the Cikada musicians who play the pieces with sensitivity, insight and commitment. An exceptionally resourceful contemporary quartet – in the wake of their recording of Cage, Saariaho and Maderna, the Cikadas won both the coveted Nordic Council Music Prize in 2005 and the Edison Award – its members have always been open to the possibilities of jazz and worked together with improvisers. They have collaborated on recordings with Trygve Seim and The Source, Arild Andersen and Annette Peacock amongst others.

One of the miracles of “So There” is the way in which it so often sounds like the work of a united band swinging with its word-spinning frontman who – surely? –is responding to the rhythms of Swallow’s bass or the emotional spectrum of Kuhn’s differentiated piano playing, the changing climates of the strings... Listening to an integrated piece like ‘Here Again’ or ‘Ambition’, it is easy to forget that Creeley had passed away at the end of March, 2005 - five months before the first notes were played in Oslo. It is a testimony to Swallow’s compositions that Creeley’s spirit seems to suffuse every minute of this music.

Steve Swallow himself solos with characteristic singing élan - no other contemporary bass guitarist uses the upper register more melodically or soulfully –and Steve Kuhn seems delightfully uncaged here, able to use all he knows. Swallow encourages him to play freely,

to play the blues, to play with an intense lyricism. There are associative points of contact with other Kuhn plus strings projects from the pianist's own "Promises Kept" (ECM, 2002) to the classic "October Suite" (Impulse, 1966). There is also dialogic playing that recalls Kuhn's 40 year old trio with Swallow and Pete La Roca and sound-flurries suggestive of the Birth of the Free and the times when Kuhn played with Coltrane and Coleman. Meanwhile the poems suggest that it's never too late, despite appearances, to be what you could be:

*You're there
still behind
the mirror,
brother face.*

*Only yesterday
you were younger,
now you
look old.*

*Come out
while there's still time
left
to play.*
(from 'Histoires de Florida')

Robert Creeley published dozens of books in his lifetime: books of poetry, a novel, drama, short stories, collections of essays, diaries, interviews, and letters including his multi-volume correspondence with Charles Olson. A recipient of numerous awards, he was New York State Poet Laureate from 1989-91, and elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1999.

Steve Swallow has played with many of the major figures of contemporary jazz and post-bebop music, beginning in 1960 when he first met Paul and Carla Bley. Soon thereafter he was playing in the Paul Bley Trio, the Jimmy Giuffre Trio and the George Russell Sextet with Eric Dolphy. After playing with Gary Burton in Stan Getz's group, he joined the vibraphonist's band, playing in most of Burton's ensembles over a 20 year period. He has played on Carla Bley's recordings since 1978. His albums as a leader or co-leader have appeared on XtraWatt, WATT and ECM, and include "Always Pack Your Uniform On Top", "Are We There Yet?", "Deconstructed", "Real Book", "Go Together", "Swallow", "Duets", "Carla", "Home", "Hotel Hello". A perennial poll winner he has consistently topped both the Down Beat Critics Poll and the Down Beat Readers Poll since 1985.