

On the Record: A Chat About Recording and Releasing Music

Sean Meehan & Theresa Wong

In conversation between October-November 2021

TW: I want to launch right in with a technical recording technique that you shared with me a while ago: the mid-side (MS) stereo technique¹. I think more people should know about it.

SM: MS crusade? I usually try to record in MS, even in a multi-mic, multitrack session, I build around an MS mix. I did a recording with John (McCowen) and Barry (Weisblat) mid-pandemic and there is an MS pair and a XY pair in there. And the XY doesn't have the imaging that MS offers, let alone the mixing possibilities.

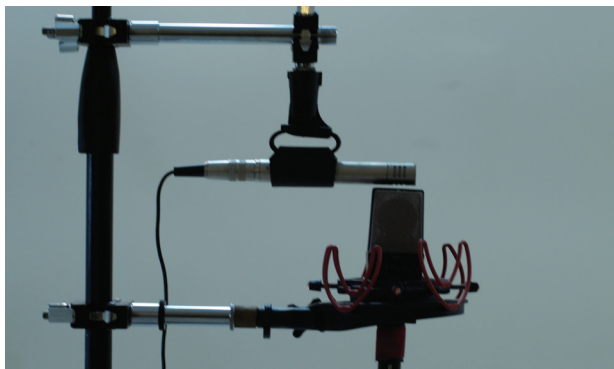
TW: What differences do you notice? Were they placed at about the same location?

SM: No, there are different positions, so you can't really do a side-by-side comparison. It was in a big space—it was at ISSUE Project Room, and we were set up around the room. But the image is so much more vivid and the depth of field is a little stronger with the MS and the XY is a bit flat.

TW: Yeah, I never really liked the real close sound of an XY pair. When I record stereo I like ORTF or a widely spaced pair.

SM: When do you decide to use a studio as opposed to just a nice room that you bring remote recording gear into?

TW: I guess it depends on the situation, the budget, and timing. For example, I was going to record my solo [*Practicing Sands* out in 2022 on fo'c'sle] in a good sounding room or studio, but then the pandemic came, so I did it at home. If I were to do that again, I would look for either a studio or a really nice reverberant church or concert hall that really sounded good. How about you? Do you like going into studios?



¹ Mid-Side or MS is a very flexible and powerful stereo recording configuration which typically uses a cardioid microphone and a microphone with a figure 8 pattern to capture the middle and the sides of a sound source on different tracks, which after the recording is made can then be mixed to adjust the width of the sound field.

SM: Umm, not really. I like studios because of the technology and precision that is possible. But they're not really good creative spaces. Oh, I think they're really great for recording notated music. When you know exactly what you're going to do. But I always find, you know, the clock ticking is too much pressure and not so conducive to anything improvised or indeterminate. And that equaling money is stressful. I admire the history of recording studios and the people who build them and keep them in order.

Also, for live music, a lot of them don't sound especially good and can just be very dead because they're really made for recording close mic'ed instruments, often one at a time. So often it's not easy for me to play in them. So I like them for what they are good for: precision and quality. Anytime I'm in a real pro studio I am in awe, and thankfully I am not paying for the time. But the few times I've had notated music to record, there's nothing better. There is a percussion quintet on my first CD, from 1991 and we did it at Sear Sound (one of the best studios) and had Barry Wolifson, a great engineer, and Walter's (Sear's) beautiful AKG C-24 microphone. Just bliss.

TW: Yeah, I feel the same way about studios too. I love being in them. I love the focused work of just having to really concentrate and be detail oriented. But I think there's a certain kind of sterile quality that you also feel—like when the music needs a certain amount of uncertainty then it's a little harder. I liked reading *Chasing Sound* [by Susan Schmidt Horning]. Did I tell you about that book? It covers some of the early history of recording. So when you record, you said you typically like to set up MS. Has that kind of evolved to be your steady go-to or do you think about other options according to the project?

SM: I prefer starting with MS, but I am flexible to the needs of the situation. Like the solo cowbell piece [*Magazine* out in 2022 on Sacred Realism], I had to do it on the fly with a Zoom recorder.

TW: Oh really?

SM: Yeah, cuz I couldn't bring equipment in.

TW: Where did you record that?

SM: Off the southern tip of Manhattan there is an island called Governors Island. And on it are two Revolutionary era forts. One of them is Fort Jay, a star-shaped fort which protected New York Harbor from invasion during the Revolutionary War period. In that time, it had a



Microphone setup for Practicing Sands which includes an MS configuration behind the cello

bank of cannons on top, and under that, below ground, there are powder magazines. They're rooms where gunpowder was kept for the cannons. So I recorded it in one of the powder magazines. It had a nice sound, and being underground and on an island, it was relatively quiet. Nice sounding quiet rooms are very difficult to find in New York City....

TW: And did you just use the internal mics of the Zoom recorder?

SM: Yes, the fort is a national park, and I didn't get permission because I thought it'd be too much trouble. It seemed unlikely I would be allowed because, you know, when you say a "recording session" I think people start to imagine something bigger than it is—that there will be a big crew or something. So I spent a day scoping it out to see how often park rangers came by. I learned they almost never come and then I went back in with my Zoom recorder and set it up and just played it two times.

TW: Did any people come in?

SM: No one ever came by at all. It was a weekday and it's an island so you need to take a boat there and very few people do that unless there is a special event, or a weekend. I had it pretty much all to myself. And if anyone had walked in, it would have just looked like me standing in an empty room because the recorder and the cowbell were not easily noticeable.



TW: So how did you figure out where to place the recorder?

SM: On the day I was doing reconnaissance, I did a few tests. It is an interesting room, acoustically. It is all stone, kidney shaped, with an arched ceiling—so there are no parallel surfaces. The sound is live, but with a very controlled, immediate decay.

TW: I listened to the whole thing last week. I had just gotten back from a trip to record some sounds in Chinatown and I was really exhausted, so I was going in between sleep and wakefulness while I was listening and it was really beautiful because it was like being tapped on the shoulder

to come back to wakefulness with the bell and then just fading back into half sleep and then another tap...and so on. Afterwards, I felt like I had been in a different world, as if the music was a comb which had been inserted into a space, and the sounds were like a bracket around time—it was really great.

SM: Thank you. I'm struggling a bit with the artwork for that, maybe you have some thoughts? So before I came upon that location to record, the piece was probably 70% set. And then I spent a day in the space just doing reconnaissance, just standing there for hours to see who might drop by if I were to record there. I was playing a bit, revising some parts of the piece, but also thinking about the room and its history as a site of warfare and killing, but in this very imprecise way: shooting cannonballs—big balls of lead, or whatever they are made from—into the harbor, with hopes of maybe hitting a ship in some vulnerable place. And how now, in a room about the same size as the powder magazine I was standing in, out in the middle of the desert somewhere in Arizona, men and women sit in these rooms and fly drone missions around the world, killing with utmost precision, though the targets are often misidentified. I kept thinking of this as I finished the piece and returned to record it, maybe a week or two later. So in my mind these thoughts are now inseparable from the piece, which in its conception had nothing at all to do with warfare, and whereas I may have thoughts about warfare, I would not choose to express them by making a pretty minimal piece for solo cowbell! So I have been wondering how to represent that without trying to align myself with a political position that was not the genesis of the piece whatsoever. How to do this in some genuine way.

TW: Well, it's interesting that even cowbells have become controversial in recent years because of excessive noise at sports stadiums and even for animal protection in the Swiss alps. How did you choose the cowbell?

SM: I just saw it in a Goodwill store and I felt sorry for it. It was on a shelf with bric-a-brac: candlestick holders, ashtrays, ceramic figurines, you know, all of the orphans in that section of Goodwill. The cowbell seemed especially forlorn, I was clearly projecting onto it. But it is quite beautiful, with an amazing patina and it's very smooth, very soft to the touch. So I think it had service as an actual bell on an animal. It has a softness, a smoothness that I think comes from brushing against the fur of an animal. I bought it with no intention other than, you know, kind of rescuing it from Goodwill. Even though I'm sure it was in no need of rescue whatsoever, and probably quite happy with its comrades on the shelf.



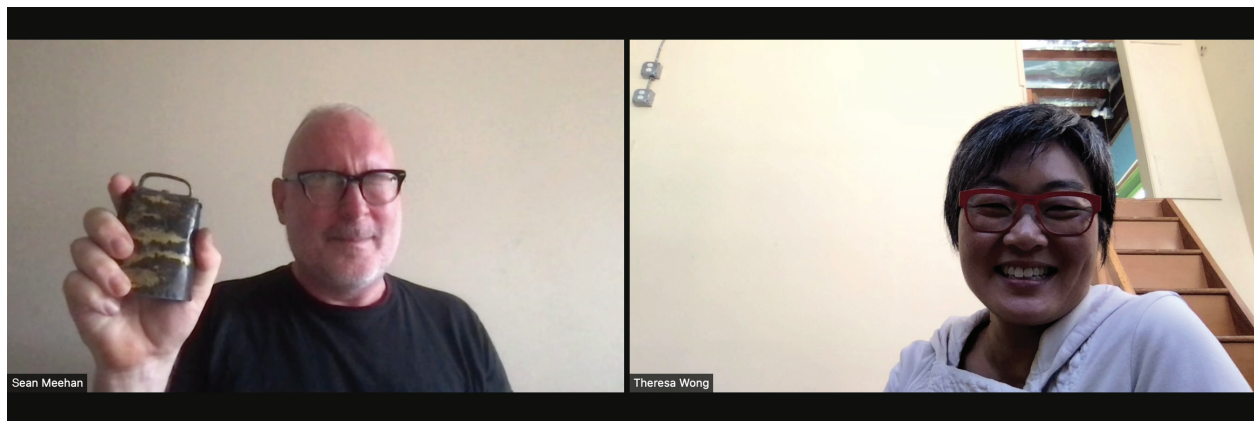
TW: I think it has benefited from being rescued.

SM: I hope so. It has been a nice companion, but again there is a fair bit of projection going on....

TW: The patina and what you're saying too—the fact that it was probably just rubbed away by fur perhaps—I mean, that would make a beautiful cover to me.

SM: I also realized that a lot of people don't know what a cowbell is. In talking to people about this, they just actually don't know what a cowbell is. Or they think it's like the Latin percussion version of the cowbell, like the instrument version. So a picture is definitely in order. And this one is a beautiful object. The patina is extraordinary. And it's so nice to hold—it really fits right in my palm.

TW: Ah, it's so nice. Turn it around. Let me see the other side.



SM: It is almost like a landscape.

TW: Indeed—or a map, you know? Yeah, I love it. I would just use that as your cover.

SM: So do you want to talk the other side? The release side?

TW: Yeah.

SM: You have an actual background in design, right?

TW: Yeah, I worked a few years in design before getting into experimental music.

SM: And did you see any overlap? Initially? Or?

TW: Oh, yeah, tons. I mean, I feel I came to composing through learning the process of design, and all the creative thinking and process oriented work, basically trying to look at things in a different way. So I feel like that really influenced the way that I've gotten back into music.

SM: Can you give an example of something that translates to both design and music?

TW: For example, when I was in college studying design, one of our projects was to look at health care workers and their environments. We observed people in hospitals to see how design could improve their safety in various situations. And it wasn't that we should design *a thing*. Sometimes it might be a process that needs to be improved in order to make a work environment safer. And this comes out of the vision of David Kelley and IDEO, and that

whole way of thinking. They call it “need finding”. So it was looking at a situation and seeing how you could create better situations. I eventually got back into music because I realized I didn’t want to be designing things that were practical anymore, but rather designing and creating things that served the needs of human beings for art, and whatever that brought us—however intangible that might be. So early on, I began making improvised operas, which are still questions to me—that is, I don’t really think they quite succeeded—they were more questions into how improvisation could be placed in a larger theatrical context, because I love that unknown that comes out of improvising and the kind of magic that can happen. I would get frustrated when I went to see a theater or opera production because it was all so prescribed and perfect and precise. I wanted more of that open-endedness. So I thought, well, OK—will that work? In a way it was like “need finding”, because I wanted this certain experience. And I wanted to explore those different areas that I loved in the theatrical experience—like sets and costumes and color, and how that moves you in a particular way that is different from just hearing music. So then, the design process was a matter of trying different structures, trying out different procedures to see if it would work.

SM: Do you have any models that you’re working from? When you started the operas and incorporated other mediums into your work, where did you draw inspiration from?

TW: I had seen a piece directed by Peter Brook when I was studying graphic design in Vienna. It was *Le Costume* or *The Suit*, by Can Themba. I mean, that’s very scripted and everything, but that work really moved me. And then Peter Sellars as well. I saw his marathon production of *The Peony Pavilion*, a classic Chinese opera. It went on for three weekends for six hours each weekend or something like that. Later, I heard him give a lecture and met him when I was researching my second improvised opera. And then, I would say Robert Wilson’s work. But part of that was actually getting the motivation for trying things in a more open-ended way, because I saw a production that I felt was so rigid. I think it was the *Black Rider*. I knew a lot of the musicians were improvisers, and yet the music was just very straightforward to me, and I felt like I wanted to break out of that. Then I was also inspired by Fluxus and saw the Flux-kits of George Maciunas, which were like little opera kits in my mind. He was a graphic designer as well.

SM: And in your operas and theatre-based work, is narrative important?

TW: No, not so much. They’re less about linear narratives and more about themes.

SM: How many have you made?

TW: I did two. The first one was on different forms of love, and that was part of my master’s thesis concert at Mills College. And the second one was a couple years later on the topic of sleep. That was at least the “container”. I just think sleep is so mysterious and amazing, and there’s



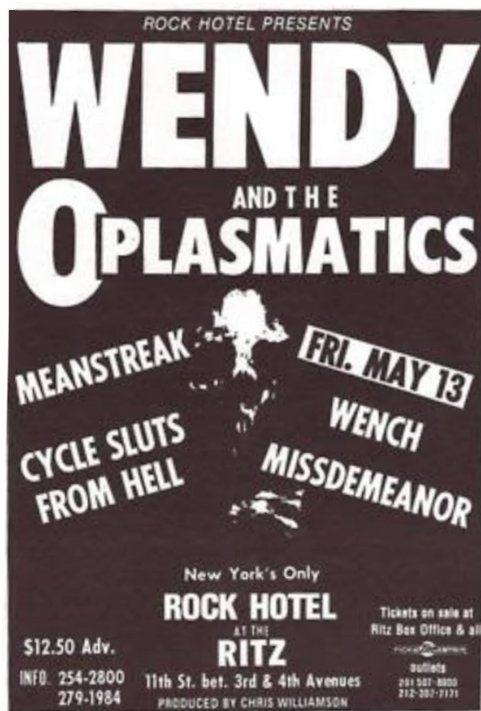
O Sleep, Southern Exposure, San Francisco 2010

so much that is still unknown about it. It's also a time when there's so much drama happening; not just sex before sleeping, but out-of-body experiences, lucid dreaming, physical healing, and things like that. And operas are supposed to be this epitome of *drama*. To me, that happens in sleep!

SM: And this current interest? What is your theatrical work like now? Do you see the video works as an extension of that?

TW: Yeah, for sure. The installed song [As We Breathe] that I've shared with you is one area that I really want to explore now. Maybe it has less to do with improvisation. It's not so much the juxtaposition of improvisation with theater, but more the use of multimedia to experience something like a song. But improvisation definitely plays an important part in it. So, going back to design and releasing stuff, how did you get into letterpress and graphic design and all the things that I feel are so important in the way you release your own music?

SM: I don't have any training as a designer. But I was always drawn to vernacular design, just everyday things. I remember being very young and paying a lot of attention to handpainted bodega and supermarket signs—signs they used to put on white paper in the supermarket windows. I remember being with my mother in the supermarket and being fascinated by those and signs for flea markets and fairs and salsa concerts that were printed on that heavy chipboard and tacked to a pole or bulletin board—those high contrast, cheaply produced printed signs. So hand-painted lettering and the vernacular printing, I encountered daily. I was always drawn to that. And then as I got a little older, there was a version of that which really made a strong impression on me. There was this concert series called Rock Hotel in New York. And the guy who ran those, Chris Williamson, made posters for the concerts that were just ubiquitous. In my teenage years, these Rock Hotel posters had a very simple, clear design; a knockout, you know, white on black reverse Xerox with dark imagery. He used the same very bold sans serif



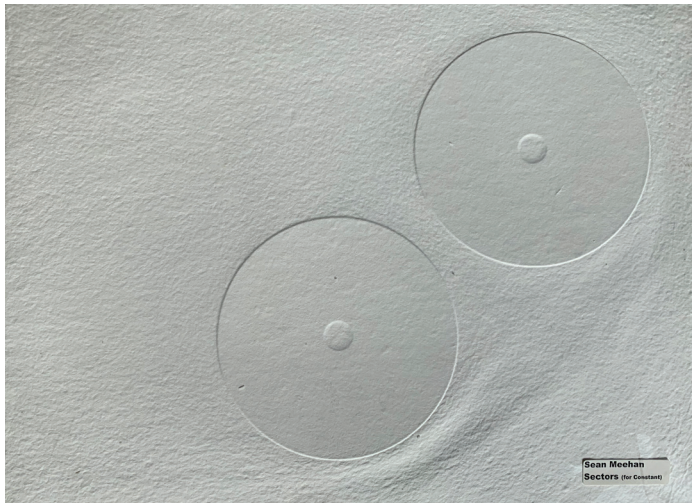
typeface, probably Helvetica, probably made with stick-on letters. The Rock Hotel posters were just ubiquitous: he had them all over downtown New York. I was so intrigued by them. I would go to the concerts even if I didn't know the bands, just based on the design. And similarly record covers from a local label called Wackies that my friends and I loved made a strong impression. Similar aesthetic: clear, simple, bold. Bronx Bauhaus. They were very legible, minimal, and really stood out. So my interest in vernacular design was the foundation, and then the Rock Hotel and Wackies and other record labels added to that and I really started thinking about design formally at that point. When I first made a CD, it wasn't a great experience because it was really early on, like 1990 I think, and at the time there weren't as many options as there are now for packaging. You had to get a jewel box, no, a jewel case—but you know that to be in certain stores, you had to have a long box...I don't know if you remember this...



TW: Oh God, yes—because they had to stand up in the shelves.

SM: A CD had to be as high as an LP if you wanted your record to be in Tower Records on consignment. It had to have a barcode, had to be the jewel case, had to be in a long box.

So it was so expensive, and you couldn't do small quantities yet. It was so expensive! When I did my first solo CD, I thought, oh this is not sustainable at all. And then there was a guy in Arizona, Bruce Licher from Independent Project Press doing really fine letterpress packaging which was a little closer to my aesthetic, but it was still kind of expensive. It was like wedding invitation style prices. I did my next CD [*Fujieda Sato Meehan Improvisations 07 October 1994*] with him and it was really nice looking. He's a very good printer, but it was about the same price as the jewel cases. So I thought, this is not a solution. And then I learned there was a place in New York to learn how to do letterpress printing, The Center for Book Arts. I took some classes on letterpress printing with the intention of making my own CD packaging. I designed, die cut, and printed my duo CD with Sachiko M there, as well as a few others and some for Tim Barnes' Quakebasket label. It was funny because most people who go there are making these very fine art books in limited editions, with, you know, hand-sewn binding and stuff and I was cranking out CD covers like a factory. They rent the presses by the hour, and I was trying to get as much done as possible. I was just like a machine and I was die cutting, which can be messy, with paper flying around in total contrast to the other people making these very fine beautiful books in small editions. Anyways, I learned how to print which made it much more affordable and I could do runs of whatever size I wanted and I could have more control over the aesthetics. I also had the satisfaction of having touched every one of them and having some connection to the listener as I hand-fed, printed, cut, and folded each CD cover. Plus, most of them were unique in some way—for example, the duo with Sachiko M, which has a thread and a unique tear on the cover. And my duo with Toshimaru Nakamura [*From Tour*] which has a puzzle piece from the roadmap we used while on tour, when we still used paper maps to drive to gigs. Or my solo *Sectors (for Constant)* where the CDs are encased in paper which



I pulled the pulp for and placed the CDs in each one. So that connection with the listener that is so important in the music we play, I was trying to do something analogous, if even as a gesture, in the packaging. An important part of my introduction to experimental music was through the Helmholtz book [*On the Sensations of Tone*]. When I came upon that book in the library as a teen it really expanded my sound world. I would sit in the library and have these internal non-cochlear listening experiences, just reading and imagining how his experiments sounded. I could hear them...I could hear the sounds being produced. I could hear the beating frequencies even though maybe I hadn't heard that physically yet. I could imagine the sounds of his experiments, which I later realized came from Mad Magazine, because when I was a kid, I would read Mad Magazine and for me, Mad was very sound oriented in a way that prepared me to have a deep experience with Helmholtz.



Packaging for Sectors (for Constant) and Meehan Reads Helmholtz

TW: I used to read Mad as a kid but I don't remember the sound aspect.

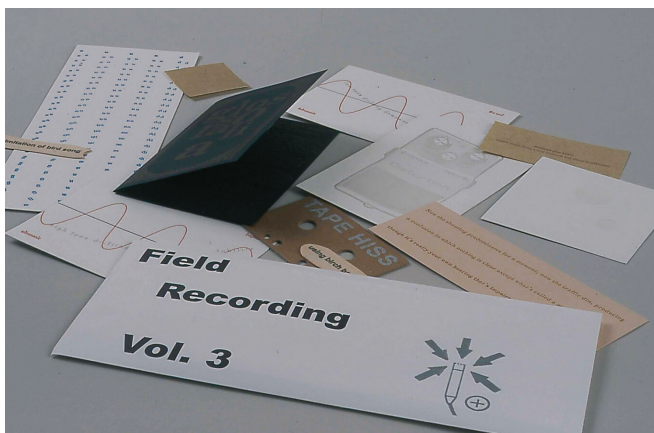
SM: Yeah there was one writer from Mad named Don Martin and he would depict all of these sounds using phonetics to intone these weird, slightly obscene sounds. Some of his cartoons were entirely sound-based through phonetics. One had to imagine what the sounds were like based on his illustration and phonetics. If you were into Don Martin, the vocal and text-based works of Schwitters and Marinetti are not so radical. They are quite similar, to me at least. And it laid the foundation for a really profound, somewhat psychedelic experience of reading Helmholtz. At that age—and still to a great extent—I didn't necessarily understand the physics of the text. But the experience of imagining sounds I got from Mad Magazine made finding Helmholtz really exciting: to sit in the library and just drift off into this soundworld. And this made me want to make my own sound pieces without sound. So that led to pieces like *Field Recordings Vol. 3* which is a folio of different printed pieces, and *Audio*, a set of sound suggestions in the form of a boxed set of cassette-like objects. But these stem from Don Martin and Helmholtz. And having learned how to print allowed me to make those pieces. Also, meeting Eric from Anomalous Records, and seeing all of the recordings he sold that were in non-traditional

packaging, it really freed me up from my previous mindset, which was more like, "How do I get this into Tower Records?" So I started to look into design a little more. I took out books from the library, and read about the Bauhaus, and Jan Tschichold. And then Lawrence Weiner whose work somehow clicked with me as related to Don Martin and Helmholtz...his conceptual pieces I thought were similar.

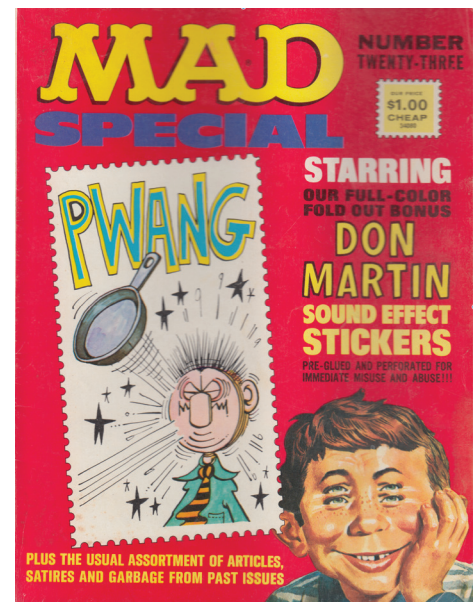
TW: Yes, yes.

SM: When did you first become aware of design and visual art?

TW: As a kid I was always into visual art as well as music. I would enjoy painting and drawing, but I also really loved letterforms. I remember scouring my house for any book that had any bit of calligraphy in it, so that I could learn how to write old letter forms with a calligraphy pen. And then there was the beginning of personal computers where you could use Print Shop and print in different fonts. Then there was the program Fontographer and you could make your own typefaces and fonts. Then gradually I studied design in college, and it was product design. It was actually a bit more geared towards the mechanical engineering and 3-D design of things. But I did a lot of freelance work as a graphic designer, and got exposed to people like Jan Tschichold and a lot of type designers. A couple friends and I were also doing freelance work together and really getting into it. They actually have a letterpress business in New York. Maybe you know of Swayspace? They started it years ago. And they do a lot of amazing letterpress and work with photo plating and everything. So I had done some paper marbling as a teenager in a workshop, and just loved making things. I loved the kind of precision in graphic art and designing and bookbinding, so when I stopped doing design for a while to get back into music, it just seemed like a natural thing



Meehan's Field Recording Vol. 3



to apply design to my music. It was like having a perfect client; this experimental music label needs covers, or this improvised opera on sleep needs a poster (laughs). So I just started designing my own things.

SM: I love the marbling technique you use for some of your covers. What is it exactly?

TW: It's two basic styles. One is commonly referred to as Turkish marbling, which actually has roots in many parts of the Middle East and got further developed

later in Europe. For that technique, I use acrylic paint which floats on the surface of a gel solution. The gel is water mixed with Irish Moss, which is literally a kind of moss that grows on a tree. And then some of the albums are done with Suminagashi, which is a Japanese technique done with Sumi ink that floats on plain water. You combine the ink with a surfactant, like dish soap mixed with water, and that acts as the spreader which prints as whitespace. So I've been using both techniques to create marbled paper and then I scan them to use in the album design which is then commercially printed. I'm thinking maybe for another release to actually have a really small run and marble each cover, but it's kind of a conundrum how to release things these days, as you know.

SM: How do you decide which marbling to use for a particular cover?

TW: Usually with each album, I have a vague idea just based on the artist and the music, and then I'll just start and it's a really finicky process. First of all, the different colors of paints act really differently. And then everything matters like the temperature of the day and the way you mix the gel. To me it's really similar to improvised music, because there's so much you can control and then so much you can't. So I have an idea, and then I just start. Often, certain paint will not act the way I want it to, or it will go in a different direction that I didn't expect. But usually I'll work on a design for a week or two, just cranking out a ton of sheets every day. The sequence of events also really matters. For example, if you drop a certain color of paint first, versus another color, or how much you drop, and with what tool, like an eye dropper versus broom corn, which are just fine stalks of sorghum. The broom corn allows tinier droplets of paint than an eye dropper. So all of that is like a kind of choreography you do to get a certain pattern. And then once I've found something that works, I'll just do it over and over, because each one will be different. That way, I have options with subtle differences. Then I see which one I like the best, and the artist likes the best. So, it's pretty involved.

SM: What do you think drew you to this technique?

TW: I think it's just so much like life. When I was a teenager, I got into sailing on tall ships, and it was similar to this work as a metaphor, because you have a certain amount of things you can control and be really disciplined about. You have everything in ship shape, like all the ropes really carefully coiled so that at any moment, you can do a certain tack. You have to mind the weather, and mind the helm, and mind the bow, but then ultimately, you can never go exactly where you want to go, because you just have to follow the wind—there's nothing else you can do! (both laughing). And I just always loved that metaphor, because it felt so true. You can have a certain intention, and it may or may not happen. And usually, what you don't really expect turns out to be the most fun or the most interesting. It's the balance of being prepared and being ready for the unexpected, which I like.



Suminagashi technique on water



Cover options for the album Pink Sea Thrift



