

Back in Time

Otherworldly musician **Antony Hegarty** kicks off 2008 Time-Based Art Festival

by stephen marc beaudoin

Antony Hegarty is at the vanguard of 21st century contemporary queer artists. As the headline opening act of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Arts' 2008 Time-Based Art Festival, the musician leads a wild and motley lineup of maverick queer avant-artists exploding in Portland this month over 10 days.



From the keyboard-thrashing antics of pianist Kenny Mellman with busomy belter Bridget Everett, to the bleakly comic films of duo Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, this year's TBA boasts a boatload of gay, lesbian, bi, trans and otherwise unclassifiably queer artists, all pushing the boundaries of form and function, audience and experience, expression and excess.

But among them, 36-year-old Hegarty stands apart. Frontman to the fast-ascending chamber pop outfit Antony and the Johnsons, he is a kind of quivering androgynous angel, with an affecting slip of a voice creeping out from his soft-framed face. It's a miraculous voice that combines the touching bleat of Nina Simone with the breathy expressivity of Joni Mitchell, with notes of Lou Reed and John Prine. It's a talent that has earned him a prestigious Mercury Prize (the U.K. equivalent of the Grammy) for his 2005 breakout album, *I Am a Bird Now*, heaps of critical acclaim and a quickly swelling audience.

None of this seems to have swelled Hegarty's head: He gives a Friday morning interview almost apologetically, stuttering and stopping to work out specific points along the way.

"I'm really engaged in this kind of interior stuff," Hegarty says about his songwriting work, in an almost-whisper, by phone from his New York studio. Catches of music carry in the background: Between interviews, he's also mixing and editing his new album, *The Crying Light*, scheduled for an early 2009 release. "My grasp of music is really rudimentary," he continues. "I'm not a schooled musician."



That hardly seems to matter to the extraordinary A-list popular and serious musicians lining up to work with Hegarty. In collaborations spanning from work with Björk to Lou Reed to the U.S. dance-pop group Hercules and Love Affair, Hegarty is charting new pop territory in his globetrotting musical career. He's also, by addressing issues of gender politics and identity, both expressly and in his own inimitable subversive way, at the front line of contemporary queer performance.

Among the gem-perfect genderqueer songs on *I Am a Bird Now*, Hegarty expresses a youthful yearning for identity realized ("One day I'll grow up, I'll be a beautiful woman," he sings on one tune, "but for today I am a child. Today I am a boy.") and a very pained longing for a sort of "lostest beauty" in "My Lady Story."

He talks wistfully about the "most wonderful. eve-oenina experience" he had

recently, as guest at a transgender conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. He recalled meeting a pair of Native-American trans boys, often referred to as "two-spirit persons." Meeting them "just blew my mind and opened my heart," Hegarty says. "Especially when you're doing music and art, expressing affairs of the heart and the spirit."

Of late, Antony and the Johnsons have been gigging with symphony orchestras, exploding their intimate songs to heart-bursting proportions, in carefully calibrated orchestrations by frequent collaborator Nico Muhly, a hotshot young queer composer. Hegarty likens the experience of playing his music backed by a 70-person band like the Oregon Symphony, which resident conductor Gregory Vajda will direct in the TBA concert, to "getting on a much bigger river with your canoe. You're riding a much bigger wave of sound and energy."

Hegarty's own sound and energy underwent a miraculous transformation when, at the tender age of 12, his family moved from the United Kingdom to the United States. "The streets were so big and everything was so megasized," he remembers thinking about his new home country. And although he now has citizenship in both countries, he says "the stakes are especially high" today in America's rocky artistic and political landscape.

The night before our interview, Hegarty watched Barack Obama's Democratic presidential nomination acceptance speech on television, and came away with a mixed reaction of both "hope and trepidation," he says. "I wouldn't have guessed that someone would invoke the specter of hope at this point in American culture. I don't know that we could have anticipated that, given the last 10 years or 15 years."

Hegarty ties some of his own musical hopes as a musician and artist in with those of his second home country.

"Maybe something really redemptive is going to happen for America in the next few years," Hegarty suggests. "My whole thing is, I wanna participate. I wanna grow, I wanna evolve, I wanna move through my brokenness," he says, "and be part of the solution."

The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art presents the 2008 Time-Based Art Festival through Sept. 14. For a complete schedule visit www.pica.org/tba.

Antony and the Johnsons perform with the Oregon Symphony 8:30 p.m. Sept. 5 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Admission is \$20-\$75.