

Interviews

Fennesz

By Mark Richardson

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Christian Fennesz's latest solo album, the fine *Black Sea*, came out at the tail-end of 2008. It hit right about the time that music journalists started scrambling to get together their year-end lists, so in terms of press coverage, at least, that probably blunted some of its impact. His albums tend to unfold slowly over long periods of attentive listening, and *Black Sea* is no different. You have to live with it for a little while.

Fennesz has been releasing records under his own name since the 1995 *Instrument* EP on Mego, the experimental label based in Vienna, one of his home cities (he splits time between there and Paris). On his proper solo albums, he works slowly, usually releasing an album every three or four years. But he's active in collaboration (his most high-profile recent gig has been two records with Ryuichi Sakamoto) and remixes, and fans of experimental electronic music see his name popping up regularly. We spoke to him in Vienna by telephone, the morning that his copies of *Black Sea* arrived in the post.

Pitchfork: So *Black Sea* is complete.

CF: It is, I just got the copies, my first copy. I was just opening a little package and saw them.

Pitchfork: Oh, nice.

CF: They look great.

Pitchfork: You take a pretty fair amount of time with your solo albums, and it's been a little while since your last one. Is putting them together a long process? Or is it just a matter of making a time to do it?

CF: It's probably both. I mean, I could work faster I guess, but especially right now, in the last few years, I just didn't feel like putting out anything, you know? I didn't feel ready. And yeah, there were lots of other projects as well, but I just found that-- a while ago, I was worried about my officially "very slow" speed [*laughs*], with solo records, but I'm not worried anymore. As long as I'm not really 100% happy with the result, I just don't release anything.

Pitchfork: And during that period, are you working on tracks daily? Do you go times where you just put it down for a while?

CF: I almost work daily. I have established this routine now. I go to the studio in the morning, I work, I eat something in the middle, and then I work until five, six, go back home. It seems that I need some kind of routine. And when I do this, I just work on different collaboration tracks, field music stuff, whatever. There are always things to do. At if there's nothing to do, I'm trying to explore, trying out new software, whatever. Rehearse guitar a little bit.

Pitchfork: Is it a completely different experience working alone as opposed to collaborating? I mean, obviously you're by yourself in your studio...

CF: I kind of like that. It's like a cave, the studio. I can really dive in and I'm completely alone and in control of everything that's happening here, and I kind of enjoy that. I do love to collaborate as well, but, well, I think I could not be in a band or something anymore. I've been working alone for too long.

Pitchfork: Do you feel extra pressure when you're working on something that's going to come out under your name?

CF: There is some pressure. I would lie if I said no. Especially also because there is so much time in between. And there is always a lot of expectation, it seems [*laughs*]. But of course I can only work within my own limitations, and sometimes people are just hoping for too much, I have the impression. But anyway, I stopped reading reviews a long time ago. That was advice that David Sylvian actually gave me, and it's really good [*laughs*]. Otherwise it just produces ghosts in your head, and that's not really welcome. But there is some pressure, yes. Especially towards the end of production. I'm starting to get a little bit worried, but it's OK. I'm in control of that.

Pitchfork: Do you have sort of a guiding concept for an album? Or does it sort of come out of individual tracks? Are there threads between them?

CF: It depends. For example, for *Endless Summer*, I just had the title, and that already means something. This is already some kind of path that I had to follow then. With the new one, it just unfolded by doing it. I liked the title, *Black Sea*. I just like the words. It's not site-specific, or whatever. There's no bigger concept behind it. It seems that all the compositions I do within a certain time, they all have something to do with

each other, so I think that's what it is. It's not a concept album. I just started at one point and ended at another one, and that was it.

Pitchfork: I have listened to album via the stream online, and it's hard for me to figure out the track divisions. I know the track listing, but looking at some of the titles-- "Black Sea", "Perfume for Winter", "Grey Scale"-- they do make you think of a more desolate space, or a colder space. I don't know if those were threads that you felt were going through it.

CF: I think the overall atmosphere and color of it was definitely a little bit darker than before. I don't know why really; it just happened to be like that. And this time it felt OK to make much longer tracks, for example, some of these are like 10, 11 minutes long, which is something I've never done before. Yeah, it's probably a little bit darker than the rest I did, yes. I always have a certain sound designed to go through all of the album, which is definitely very guitar-oriented. I've been experimenting with very different sorts of distortion this time, using very special distortion pedals, actually, that someone built for me, and I think you can hear that in the overall sound. Also, there is-- I've been trying to experiment with new synthesis forms. What's that called? The new physical modeling thing. Also with like artificial reverb things, room things. And I think that makes the sound of it.

Pitchfork: It does seem like there is a good amount of guitar on the album, it seems like guitar plays a central role. What do you feel about the role of the guitar in your music right now? Is that something you'll always see yourself returning to?

CF: Yes. Actually, yes. It's kind of rooting me to what I do-- I don't know, it's like an anchor. I always want to come back to it. it's just an instrument that I know the best. For me, it's still fun also to play and to experiment with.

Pitchfork: So much of music that you do, it might exist in a purely electronic realm if it's on a computer and it's being processed and routed through outboard gear. But guitar, it's actually strings vibrating in the air. Is that connection important?

CF: Absolutely, and more and more so. Also to experiment with microphones in the room. Even if I'd record an electronic sound, you know, with a microphone in the room, it really makes a big difference. It's something that starts fascinating me. I try to maybe go on this direction a little bit more.

Pitchfork: Obviously over the period that you've been making records, technology has changed a lot, especially in terms of computers and software. Do you feel like developments in technology have a direct impact on your music and how you think of music?

CF: Yeah, because I mean I'm always curious what's coming out and what's available at the moment, I'm basically always trying to get the newest software and plug-ins and soft-synths and all that. I'm still very, very interested in that. There were many great developments in the last years, but I'm still waiting for a fantastic, killer synthesizer. It hasn't been there yet, so there's still hope. We'll see. But it does have a big influence on my music because I'm always-- as soon as I have something, I try to use it. Probably you can hear that in the music, also.

Pitchfork: Yeah, although in a way it seems like listening to the new album, it seems like some of the sound of technology is falling away. I always think there was a period in the late 1990s and in the first few years of this decade where things were changing so fast, that in electronic music in general, you could sort of hear the software a little bit more.

CF: Exactly. Yes, absolutely. And that was not always nice, I thought. For example, I was not always happy when I heard exactly the plug-in that I was using at the same time too [laughs]. I think now, maybe the quality in composing got better also, because people got more and more used to all of those new tools that they suddenly had, and that's why they're not so obvious anymore in the production.

Pitchfork: What's the process like for working with Jon Wozencroft and the packaging and covers of your records?

CF: It's basically-- well, discussing the whole thing, exchanging ideas. Jon always comes up very quickly with an idea, and that's basically where we start. Most of the time within a week, maximum two weeks, we have it together. It's basically his ideas, him doing it. If I wouldn't like something, for example, he would do something else, but basically he has the freedom to do almost what he wants, I would say.

Pitchfork: I have the original deluxe version, of *Plus Forty Seven Degrees*, that record. With the CD and slipcase and all that, and I could just look at that cover for 20 minutes. I mean, you just want to walk into that world.

CF: Absolutely.

Pitchfork: When you look back at your last few albums, how do you feel like *Endless Summer* fits into your career? Was that an important record for your career, and is it a special album for you in particular?

CF: Well they're all special for me because there's not so many and they're all just me, personally. They represent a certain period of my life. And the *Endless Summer* was my most successful record, so of course it had a special importance as well because of that. I don't know, it was a good period of my life, everything worked-- musically, everything worked really well, and I'm still happy with this album. It was also one of the only albums that I could listen to without feeling embarrassed or something [laughs]. I mean, I basically found listening to my own music, it just got played so many times in places where I went. So I listened to it; it was not a problem.

Pitchfork: With *Endless Summer* in particular, I've always been curious how much the title of that album sort of influenced the way that people heard it. Because it does feel like a warm record to me, but you always wonder, "Am I partly influenced by hearing that title?"

CF: That was an interesting thing about it. If I took another title, I think the music would've been maybe less warm sounding, do you know what I mean? If I called it *Black Sabbath* or something [laughs], then some of the tracks would have completely different atmospheres suddenly. There was the idea about the whole project that I was trying to play with those images, you know. And this is something very much related

to pop music, also the playing with images and playing with roles and names and all that. That's what I was trying out with *Endless Summer*, by doing completely electronic music, you know, so it was an interesting experience.

Pitchfork: What about covers and remixes? Earlier this year I listened and wrote something about your cover of--

CF: The A-Ha track? ["Hunting High and Low"]

Pitchfork: Yes. Something like that: How do you approach that when you were asked about that project? Why that track, and what kinds of things do you think about when you think of covering a song? Are you trying to bring out something new in the song, or transform it somehow?

CF: Well definitely transform it somehow, but still keep the core, the base of the song. This is always what I'm trying to do. And this song, I just liked it. I was always a big fan of the 80s, and my friends were laughing at me because it was very uncool to be an A-Ha fan at that time. But I just think that some of the songs are really great, really, really great. And they still are, so that's why I picked that one. And it was great to work on that project, I really enjoyed myself doing this. That project is so nice [*Fractured Records' Recovery 7" box set, which features 20 electronic artists covering various beloved pop hits --Ed.*].

Pitchfork: When you do something like that, obviously you're taking the chords from the original.

CF: Well for this one, I really had to learn [*laughs*]. I found the chords on the internet, and I played it. The whole guitar thing in the background is me playing it, actually. I'm interested especially in the harmonies, and how a bass line corresponds to a vocal line or whatever. This makes basically like the core of the song I think, and I wanted to keep that, so I had to learn it.

Pitchfork: And then it's just a matter of going over and over it, adding different things.

CF: Exactly, that's what I'm doing. I just add things, and make loops on top of other loops, and suddenly it becomes something completely different. And then I might remix the whole thing again, and it becomes something different again, so this is how I work. It's always like [*multiplying*] things.

Pitchfork: What about the work earlier this year with Mark Linkous from Sparklehorse. What is the status of that?

CF: Well, it's finished. It's called *In the Fishtank*. Basically what they do is they give you two days in the studio, and you have to do everything within those two days. So that's what we did, and it just got mixed now. I like it, it sounds great. We're finished, it will be out in March. It was quite something to do that in two days, I have to say.

Pitchfork: Are there proper songs, or is it more abstract?

CF: Well there are actually a few songs. The funny thing was that Mark plays a lot of electronics, and I played a lot of guitar, like acoustic guitar. So it was really-- we were changing the roles all the time. He played some piano too, and we actually wrote like three, four songs. And the rest of the material is more-- it's not really abstract, but it's more like instrumental songs, I would say. Well, I might go to North Carolina very soon, in February or March, and keep on working with him for a new project.

Pitchfork: After this album comes out, will you be touring at all? Playing shows?

CF: Yes, we're just about to set up something slowly. It seems that I'll be going to Asia first, then there will be another part in Europe, and hopefully I can go to the States this time also. I've been working on that.

Pitchfork: Have you played many shows over here?

CF: No, I mean I've played like once or twice in a year, that would be mostly New York, of course. We've been trying to set up tours here, but it just never works out in the end, I don't know. But I think this time we should really do it, and my agent is really working on it now. Because I do have a lot of fans in America actually, it's funny. Even if I'm never playing there, it seems that I have the most fans in the USA.