Song &

Eric Chenaux in Saint-Ouen, Paris, September 2017

Chance Man

Peripatetic Canadian singer and guitarist **Eric Chenaux** occupies an interzone between folk balladry and improvisational broadsides against form. By **Daniel Spicer**. Photography by **Maciek Pozoga**

"We experiment and improvise when we listen," declares Eric Chenaux, "improvise and experiment with our thoughts and what could be called a life: when we take a walk… when we cook… in conversation with our friends, how we listen to others, how we react (or resist), how we love, what we drink and when we drink it, we play with language and repetition… how we move or don't move, how we dance or swing to music."

Chenaux is responding to my introductory email with a freewheeling meditation on the nature of human existence. A little later in the same communication, he steers these ruminations towards the subject of his own artistic praxis: "The details of our lives are often produced with improvisation and experimentation and [in] my music, improvisation is a way to hear details I would not likely be able to hear otherwise."

There's a sense here of Chenaux as curiously amused observer of his own subjective experience, a personality not so much split as gently parted. Here too is a key to understanding the ongoing contradictions at the heart of his musical identity: a singer and songwriter possessed of angelic sweetness and clarity accompanying himself with largely improvised, visceral guitar textures that seem intent on undermining and obscuring his own songs. It's the need to communicate tussling with the urge to obfuscate; lucidity versus opacity; form against chaos.

A few days later, I speak with Chenaux via Skype from his apartment in Paris, where the Canadian has lived for the past six years. Affable and humorous, he readily admits to this apparent tension. "The schizophrenia of continuation, yeah," he chuckles. "I think I've been looking for a way to bring some of the detail that I love about some of the composed music and improvised music that I love and the sentiment of pop music – not sentimental but the kind of sentiments you can deal with in the kind of songs that I write – and wanting them all to be in the same room, not necessarily agreeing, because I don't think my guitar and my voice agree on much. But it seems like they don't mind each other too much."

This concept of the divided mind is echoed and embodied in Chenaux's phrase "Skullsplitter" – the name of a song he has recorded multiple times, and the title of his definitive album, released in 2015. As the title track of *Skullsplitter*, the tune captures Chenaux's voice in pure and open intimacy, tiptoeing into vulnerable falsetto, while his electric guitar generates a foggy drone like a Norwegian hardanger fiddle stranded on a remote hillside. Elsewhere on the album, the tension between voice and guitar is considerably more fractious. "Spring Has Been A Long Time Coming" is a hushed, optimistic folk ballad, with nylon string guitar doing its best to sketch floral filigrees while being impishly detuned in real time. "Have I Lost My Eyes?" sets up a queasy, warped pulse, like a finger placed repeatedly on the turntable as the record spins, over which Chenaux's falsetto soars and yearns, only to be pushed aside by a cramped, gut ache electric solo on the cusp of feedback. The album's eight minute centrepiece "Poor Time" is almost comically wonky, melting and warping like a Hawaiian guitar left out in tropical rain; as Chenaux croons breathy confessions, the tune loosely unspools and degrades into a soggy miasma, only just clinging to any sense of form.

"Or it becomes deformed in the performance, I think," Chenaux counters. "The songs can be played very straight, by other people and potentially by me as well, and they have been."

In performance, this deliberate deformation is facilitated by Chenaux's light-footed use of multiple pedals. "It looks like a lot," he agrees, "but there's not so many effects. There's only two or three, but I really, really use them. There's nothing subtle at all about what I'm doing with them. Everything gets wah-wah'd, everything gets filtered. If it happens, it's gonna happen on every song."

Self-deprecation aside, Chenaux succeeds in generating an astonishing array of timbres – from stylophone buzz to backwards whoosh to oddly rounded spongiform globs. "A lot of it is weird ways of getting the attack to disappear or be subverted," he explains. "There's just certain sounds that I love very much – and the guitar doesn't make those sounds. The way that [Thelonious] Monk will hit a cluster: first of all, you can't stack seconds like that on a guitar because it's impossible. But the sound of Archie Shepp on *Blasé*, where it's like [makes loose-lipped puh puh puh puh sound] – I look for that. That's outright intentional, I'd say. I'm looking for that sound of it coming out of my mouth. I try to make the guitar sound like a mouth instrument, I think. I can mimic my guitar with my mouth pretty well and I will write phrases sometimes but I have to sing them first. The mouth is an incredible instrument. More and more, my guitar sound probably comes from an intimacy with

my mouth," a sudden chuckle interrupts his flow, "as perverted as that may sound…

"I certainly give the guitar a lot of attention," Chenaux continues, smiling, "as anyone who's witnessed my sets of constant 12 minute guitar solos will be able to confirm. But I don't do two things very well at once. I often sing and then play. Or the guitar playing is a little bit more simple when I'm singing. And I like just playing guitar too, whether improvising or playing songs."

Outside of his solo work, Chenaux enjoys the opportunity to "just play guitar" in his longstanding collaboration with French vocalist Eloïse Decazes. While Decazes navigates traditional Francophone songs in a delicate, tremulous alto, Chenaux provides imaginative accompaniment ranging from ersatz hurdy-gurdy dirge to old world-primitive fingerpicking. Meanwhile, when the occasion arises, he's happy to escape the demands of song entirely, having worked as an instrumental improvisor with Calgary's Bent Spoon Duo as well as with the likes of Han Bennink and Pauline Oliveros.

Chenaux's route into the parallel realms of improvisation and songwriting has been a circuitous one. Coming out of high school in Toronto in 1987 with a head full of Gang Of Four, he formed the band Phleg Camp, playing "post-punk, for lack of a better word". The trio released an album, *Ya'red Fair Scratch*, in 1992 but its momentum was cut short that same year by an unexpected encounter. "I heard some improvised music and I just stopped playing in that group," he recalls. "The band stopped. I decided I wanted to be able to play music that was less rigid, I suppose, to be able to listen and think about what I could do."

Within just a few years, Chenaux had launched himself on the twin trajectories that still characterise his work. By 1995, he had begun performing solo guitar improvisation around Toronto "mostly opening for rock bands", while, at the same time, writing songs for other performers, most notably Michelle McAdorey, singer with indie pop outfit Crash Vegas, for whom Chenaux also played bass. Then, in 1998, he met a group of musicians active in and around the Toronto underground scene, among them keyboardist Ryan Driver and guitarist Doug Tielli, then students at the city's York University under the tutelage of pianist, composer and improvisor Casey Sokol, through whom Chenaux also befriended older composer and folk music aficionado Martin Arnold. At the same time, he fell into the orbit of various young Toronto artists including sound/visual artist Marla Hlady and writer/film maker Eric Cazdyn. In an email, Chenaux characterises this pantheon of acquaintances as artists who "in one way or another have experimented with songs/ballads/form and improvisation. They play and smear with these margins and playfully blur lines, whether with words, harmonies, sentiments, genres, the knowable and unknowable."

This inspiring new company had an immediate affect on the young Chenaux. "My improvising started to change, as it does when you start hearing other possibilities of space or activity or dynamics," he declares. "All of these people were composers, improvisors, interested in song, improvisation and composition – there wasn't a line at all between these things."

For the first time, Chenaux became involved in group improvisation, enthusiastically throwing himself into an openminded scene that, he says, "in some ways reminds me of the age of improvising in London, or in Britain, that I love so much – the generation after Derek Bailey – people like Lol Coxhill and David Toop".

Here, Chenaux cites Alterations, Toop's quartet with Steve Beresford, Terry Day and Peter Cusack, as a prime inspiration. As on Alterations' 1984 album *My Favourite Animals*, with its humorously scattershot collisions of acoustic improvisation, primitive electronic beats and tape collage, there was, according to Chenaux, in the ad hoc groupings of the 90s Toronto scene "a similar lack of concern for what the genre of improvising music is".

In 2001, Chenaux and Martin Arnold set about providing a focus for all this activity by founding the Rat-Drifting record label, giving Toronto's small but extremely active community of experimentalists a platform from which to launch a plethora of close-knit collaborations, many of which Chenaux took part in: groups like The Draperies, a trio with Driver and Tielli; and Drumheller, an improvising jazz quintet featuring Tielli and others. The Reveries, a long-running quartet also featuring Driver and Tielli, are a particularly quixotic enterprise, which transforms versions of jazz ballads and songs by Willie Nelson, Sade, Nick Cave and Prince into performative sound art. "In this ensemble," Chenaux explains, "we play… with guitars, quasi ruler, bass, nose-flute, harmonica and cell phone speakers placed in our mouths that filter and wah the sounds of the instruments through the cavity of our mouths as we sing and get picked up by the vocal mics."

Increasingly, in the first years of the 21st century, Chenaux became involved in more sound art projects. The Tristanos, a short-lived group convened by Chenaux in 2004 (and named for Lennie), is a good example. Featuring Chenaux on guitar, Janet MacPherson on vocals and whammy pedalled harmonica, Martin Arnold on electrified banjo, composer John Sherlock on contact miked clavinet and Marcus Quin on percussion, the ensemble's first performance took place at Toronto's Mercer Union art gallery. "The music was heard clean and more or less acoustic at one side of the gallery," Chenaux explains by email, "and as a soft, hazy, psychedelic wall of sound (well, maybe scrim of sound) at the other coming out of Mark Leckey's *Soundsystem* (an installation of a kind of reggae sound system speaker wall) through various wah-wahs, vocoders, both fuzz and buzz boxes, backwards echoes, pitch shifters and flurbs."

Meanwhile, at the same time as all this intense activity was taking place, Chenaux continued to keep up his songwriting chops, composing pieces for Ryan Driver's group, a "quartet, quintet or sextet depending on who could show up," he remembers. "That was like a psychedelic lounge band, playing very slow American Songbook stuff, very slow and very psychedelically, with singing. I used to write fake jazz standards for him."

In fact, the idea of the jazz standard still sits very close to Chenaux's aesthetic centre. Think of the way the great standards are constantly revisited down the decades, offering opportunities for jazz musicians to wrest new harmonic interpretations and arrangements from cornball melodies that have long been psychically

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assimilated by the collective consciousness. Think of John Coltrane playing "Every Time We Say Goodbye" or "My Favourite Things", wringing endless flights of invention from the simplest source material. In his own way, Chenaux adopts a similar approach, often recording several different versions of his own tunes. He's cut "Skullsplitter" three times – on 2006's *Dull Lights*, on his album of the same name, and as a bossa nova with Drumheller. "Have I Lost My Eyes" appeared on *Sloppy Ground* in 2008, with a melody by Michelle McAdorey and again on *Skullsplitter*, with a completely different vocal line. "I'm not very good at playing other people's songs," he demurs. "I like to pick through my own garbage. But I listen to a lot of jazz and I love it very much. For me, it's a form that is, from one angle, very close to pop music. The jazz standards share a lot of harmonic material with pop, but they're chromatically improvising with it. With a lot of great pop music – whether it be what Burt Bacharach has done alongside Dionne Warwick, or even somebody like Nick Cave – the arrangement is pretty important. People like Burt Bacharach and Nick Cave are incredible arrangers. I'm a shitty arranger. I can't write well. I'm much better at just picking up an instrument and going for it. So, for me, that's the way, as opposed to trying to arrange things. I suppose the guitar kind of un-arranges."

By 2005, Chenaux was a highly active presence on the Toronto scene – visible enough to have come to the attention of Montreal based label Constellation, known primarily for releasing albums by the post-rock behemoths Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Thee Silver Mt Zion Memorial Orchestra & Tra-La-La Band. The label approached Chenaux with an interesting proposition. "They asked me to make a record of songs," he recalls. "They wanted me to sing. And I did. It was a huge push. I'm not really sure it would have happened otherwise."

The result was 2006's *Dull Lights*, the first of five albums Chenaux has recorded for Constellation (a sixth is currently underway). His description of The Tristanos' 2004 gallery performance as "a soft, hazy, psychedelic wall of sound" serves as a fair description of the environment conjured on *Dull Lights*. Recorded by the trio of Chenaux on vocals, guitars and banjo, Martin Arnold on banjo and Nick Fraser on drums, it's essentially a contemporary folk album, albeit glimpsed through a hallucinatory mirage. The version of "Skullsplitter" that opens the set is a dream of sighing brushes and cymbals, fuzzy chords and uncomfortable banjo scratches like grit in a bowl of creamy soup. The album's title track is a billowing gauze of delicate harmonics, subtle wah and subliminal background shimmer held together by barely-there gossamer threads. Perhaps not surprisingly for a solo debut of songs, Chenaux's vocals throughout are disarmingly tentative, almost shy. "I didn't know what way to sing at all," he agrees. "That came later when I started to realise that I should just sing the way that I do when I'm alone or in the shower, which is more like I do now. I was restraining my voice. It was like I didn't want to hear it or something. I think that my love for pop, R&B and jazz singing was something that I really, really was hiding. Allowing the falsetto to come in, things like that, these are things that I was too timid to show."

If, on its 2006 release, *Dull Lights* seemed to sit alongside the then current vogue for freak-folk troubadours, by the time of its 2008 follow-up *Sloppy Ground* Chenaux had clearly emerged as an idiosyncratic talent ploughing his own singular furrow. Recorded by an octet, featuring Driver, Arnold, Fraser and others, and with the instrumentation expanded to include double bass, violin, synth and melodica, *Sloppy Ground* touched on some of the same fragmented folk as its predecessor, but also saw Chenaux emboldened as a songwriter: "Love Don't Change" is pastoral dream funk as though imagined by a hayseed, psych-country Beck, with a punchy backbeat, an endlessly delirious fuzz guitar solo and cute, tongue in cheek lyrics: *"I could fix up my looks a bit/Maybe do something with my hair/But do you have to change for love?"*.

2010's *Warm Weather With Ryan Driver* – another ensemble album, with Driver getting billing for his piano, organ and flute contributions – saw Chenaux more and more comfortably nestling up to a conventional singer-songwriter identity. But 2012's stripped back solo release *Guitar & Voice* signalled a turn towards his current modus operandi, with assured pop folk vocal performances in a constant tug of war with a skewed repertoire of avant guitar manoeuvres – a tactic that coalesced fully in the masterful *Skullsplitter*, released three years later. Early mixes of a few new tracks shared with me by Chenaux suggest his forthcoming solo album continues to explore these cracked dichotomies.

Yet certain elements of Chenaux's aesthetic have been consistent from the beginning. Through all of his work, there's an intense intimacy, as though he's singing to someone sitting very close by in a darkened room. There's an emotional intimacy too, with elusive and slippery lyrics that constantly shy away from the expected – like conversing with an old, old friend or lover, with whom you've developed a secret language of code phrases and hidden references. "That also relates to this idea of temporal and spatial middles," he suggests, "cutting out the beginning and cutting out the end, and just kind of allowing the middle to play out. I think there is an intimacy there because there's no introduction. You're dropped straight into the melody." Take, for instance, the version of "Skullsplitter" that opens *Dull Lights* with a sudden up-rush of voice, heartbreaking and impossible to ignore in its sadness and desperate immediacy. As Chenaux sighs, *"The wind has made a coast of me/The dawn wears us like jewellery/The gun powder's all over me like green light on thin ice"*, it's a plea for help, right there and impossible to ignore.

"I'm interested in melodies that sound like they might have begun years before and potentially go on way beyond the moment when you don't hear them any more," Chenaux continues, "kind of a temporal peripheral vision, a peripheral acoustic where the intention becomes not so obvious because it sounds like it's starting in the middle." I suggest The Incredible String Band's "A Very Cellular Song" as an example of a song that seems to be happening eternally, a communication from the absolute into which we can dip for a moment, but which continues to exist somewhere in infinity even when we've stopped listening. But Chenaux comes back with a much better example: *The Iron Stone*, the 2006 album by The Incredible String Band's Robin Williamson. "That record does it much more strongly than even mine," he enthuses. "Time is just completely slipping away. That's a really good example of what we're talking about. Anyone of those songs sounds like they pressed record in the middle."

The more I think about it, the more apposite the reference is. Williamson's timeless, bardic missives avoid conventional structure and form with irrepressible ease, flowing and finding their own way like clear highland spring water. That quality can be discerned in many of Chenaux's counterintuitive and ever surprising songs. It also makes perfect sense that he's drawn to Williamson's Scottish folk storytelling. Hints of British folk are littered throughout Chenaux's oeuvre. In an email, he admits to listening often to Norma Waterson, Eliza Carthy, Anne Briggs and June Tabor, while the guitar playing of Martin Carthy remains a constant source of wonder. "I don't know how he does what he does," he exclaims. "I wouldn't even know where to begin. He's one of the most unknowable musicians I've ever heard. It's unbelievable what he does with rhythm and space – and I know that that came out of him thinking about the guitar more in terms of highland pipes."

Chenaux also professes a love for Dick Gaughan's late 1970s electric folk band Five Hand Reel, which arranged traditional Scottish and Irish tunes with rock instrumentation to create a heavy folk-prog hybrid. It's easy to hear the influence in songs like "Worm And Gear" from *Dull Lights* and "Boon Harp" from *Sloppy Ground*, in which Nick Fraser's crisp, martial snare rolls impart what Chenaux calls a "highland snap", while the lyrics paint a cosy, antique fantasy: *"Wild hop alright in an old dozy light/Our public houses fade and roll"*.

By tapping into British acid folk, Chenaux also accentuates the heady sense of wide-eyed psychedelic transport that runs through his work. "For me, psychedelia doesn't mean tons of reverb," he concedes. "Skip James is incredibly psychedelic to me. For me, it's a way to talk about spending time and experiencing things sensually but also not only sensually – to experience things without necessarily understanding them. In our day to day lives, if you're at a bank and you don't understand something, you get stressed out. We spend a lot of our day needing to understand. Music is a place where I feel we can experiment without the need for that so much."

It brings me right back to something he wrote in in his very first email preamble opening this piece: "When we talk about improvising and performance, and the performance of listening, we are talking about a strange smear of time and space that then fold back into themselves and continue to experiment and improvise along side us. Song is one place of many to do this."

As our Skype chat comes to an end, Chenaux's thoughts also return to where we started, a pensive conversational ouroboros, left like a softly spoken challenge: "I'm not so interested in what musicians do. I'm interested in what listeners do. That's where the music happens. We were talking about the 'unknown' of psychedelia – that happens in listening. A musician in and of himself or herself isn't necessarily psychedelic. But the way a person listens can be incredibly psychedelic." ☐ Eric Chenaux & Eloïse Decazes's *The Bride* is released by three:four. A new album on Constellation is due in Spring 2018