

## INDIE SCENE



Steve Cohen

## PETER HIMMELMAN

## An accomplished indie artist insists the mainstream matters



"I DON'T WORK THAT OFTEN WITH inspiration," Peter Himmelman declares. "I just work with necessities." For instance, he decided several years ago to try his hand at scoring television shows because, as he says, "Music doesn't pay anymore." He found considerable success, winning an Emmy nomination for his contributions to the drama *Judging Amy*. Then came a TV writers' strike, and suddenly Himmelman found himself with time on his hands. He decided to use it by taking a leap of faith: writing a new album in two weeks, then traveling halfway across the country to record the songs at a friend's studio in Minneapolis with musicians he'd never met.

"I thought I'd challenge myself," he says, chatting from his home in Santa Monica, Calif. "I put a little pressure on. By buying that ticket, I locked myself into doing it, and by locking in, it created a structure within which I could work." The tactic worked beautifully, resulting in his latest album, *The Mystery and the Hum*. Himmelman says the gambit was, at least in part, an attempt to rouse himself from a lack of motivation for making new music.

"I suppose that sounds very romantic," he says. "There was that aspect of it,

because I could have recorded it in my own studio at my leisure. When you only have a vague impetus to do something—something creative, for example, something that you're not paid for—it's very probable that the impetus will fade away by the time you get out of the shower and dry your hair. It becomes a passing fancy. It's just putting something out there into the world, something creative as opposed to something your record contract stipulates."

Record label pressure is something Himmelman no longer has to worry about. He went through a couple of major-label contracts in the late 1980s and early '90s, then released albums on several indie labels before starting his own Himmasongs imprint. (His last two albums have been released through start-up Minivan Productions.) Contrary to popular indie sentiment, he says that record label demands can actually benefit creativity by applying rigid working parameters. "I'm conscious enough about my own limitations that if I don't have the specific need or some structure that's going to force me to finish something, it may not get finished at all."

Indeed, unlike many independent artists who insist that being ditched by a

giant record company was the best thing that ever happened to them, Himmelman gladly admits that he wouldn't necessarily turn down a major-label offer. After all, he sought TV work—including recent scores for shows like *Bones* and *Scoundrels*—to take up the slack when making records wasn't paying the bills anymore. He has also made a series of popular children's albums and hosts the variety webcast *Peter Himmelman's Furious World* at [peterhimmelman.com](http://peterhimmelman.com).

"The only reason I'm doing it like this is because I have to," he insists. "If somebody offered me a big label deal, I'd take it in a second! I'd stop doing all this stuff, having all these fishing lines in the water, and concentrate only on music. But nobody goes, 'Oh yeah, Peter Himmelman's a great artist, we should turn the world on to him. It doesn't matter how much music he sells. We love him!' Well, it actually matters *plenty*, because everyone at the labels has got a job and everyone wants to keep their job."

A frank confession, but he stands by it. "That's my mystique," he chuckles. "I hide in plain sight."

—Lee Zimmerman