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# foreign cinema

Growing from a trio to a quartet,  
Tin Hat solidifies  
its unique, eclectic sound



**T**he first track of the Tin Hat Trio's newest recording, *Book of Silk*, opens with a bittersweet violin riff floating above and merging into a melancholy accordion drone. Almost immediately, the song's composer, Mark Orton, introduces a repetitive arpeggio on acoustic guitar. But the piece's melodic theme continues to be voiced by the trio's other original members, accordionist Rob Burger and violinist Carla Kihlstedt, even as tuba (played by Bryan Smith) and harp (Zeena Parkins) add deep bottom and sparkling ornamentations to the thickening textures of "The Longest Night."

Tin Hat Trio (left to right): Mark Orton, Carla Kihlstedt, and Rob Burger.

By Derk Richardson



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A similar allocation of roles operates in the next two tracks. On Burger's "The Clandestine Adventures of Ms. Merz," Orton morphs a muted acoustic riff into a brisk rhythm guitar chop as Parkins plucks and strums and Kihlstedt and Burger glide and flutter high above Smith's modernized oompah. And on "Compay," a lilting tribute to the great Cuban guitarist/singer Compay Segundo, Kihlstedt creates haunting sighs with her bow, Burger solos on a ghostly prepared piano, and Orton holds the arrangement together with delicate picking so lightly threaded through the music that it practically disappears.

With similar instrumental orbits giving shape to most of the remaining 12 pieces on this, Tin Hat Trio's fourth CD, several things become clear about the creative strategies employed by the San Francisco Bay Area-bred but now geographically scattered ensemble. First, *trio* is no longer a satisfactory signifier for the flexible lineup. Indeed, this past January, after Burger decided to go on hiatus, the band made its debut as Tin Hat Quartet, with the New York City-based Parkins and Bay Area clarinetist Ben Goldberg joining Orton (who now lives in Portland, Oregon) and Kihlstedt. Second, although the specific elements of group chemistry are changing, a "Tin Hat sensibility" has coalesced in the nine years since Orton, Kihlstedt, and Burger formalized their musical partnership—and the six years since the release of the trio's debut album, *Memory Is an Elephant* (Angel, [www.angelrecords.com](http://www.angelrecords.com)). Third, that aesthetic now has more to do with composition and instrumental voices from within the group than with the eclectic global musical influences—Django Reinhardt's Gypsy jazz, Astor Piazzolla's *nuevo* tango, Ennio Morricone's spaghetti western scores, Béla Bartók's adaptations of Balkan village music—that seemed crucial at the outset.

"I think of myself as the rhythm section," says Tin Hat Trio guitarist Mark Orton, "and I tell the engineers when we walk into a club, 'Mix me like I'm drums and bass.'"

Orton's guitar playing, though often seeming to take a back seat to the accordion and violin, and his writing have provided the foundation for the group's ability to create a new sonic palette of acoustic textures and colors. He has no shortage of creative outlets: he has composed for dance companies, experimental radio theater, and film, and plans to release two CDs later this year—*Melencolia*



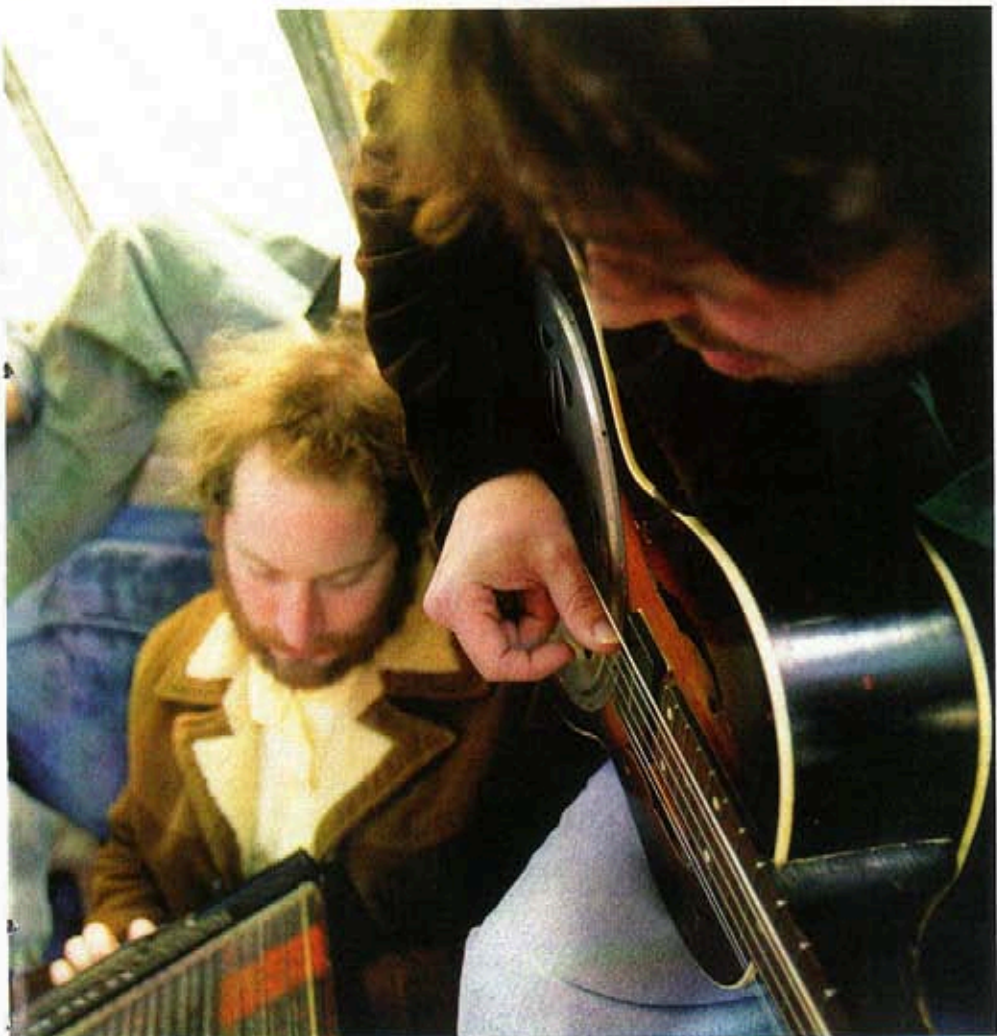
by his Aurora Septet (featuring cello, viola, violin, clarinets, voice, guitar, harmonium, reed organ, and banjo), and *The Making of Americans* (Orton's spin on old-time music, with multiple overdubs of himself plus a variety of special guests). Still, Orton's penchant for vintage instruments, such as his late-19th-century Martin, his jazz-influenced approach to rhythm, his formal training in composition at the Peabody Conservatory and the

Hart School of Music, and his experience as a sound engineer at the Knitting Factory in New York City and on the road with guitarist Bill Frisell all figure as major factors in Tin Hat's distinctive Old World/New World blend.

### What's in a Number?

"The inception of this band was based around the fact that the three of us were





friends," explains Orton, during a long, casual interview, punctuated with lots of laughter, in Kihlstedt's Victorian garret apartment in Oakland, California. "We hung out with each other, and we drove cross-country together [from the East Coast to the West], jamming in motel rooms, and that's why it started. It wasn't with some grand mission statement, it was to get together and play music. Now [Tin Hat] is becoming more of an umbrella term for a kind of weird, disorganized organization. We created a kind of template, and it's fun for us as creative people to imagine bringing different people in, whether it's some special famous guest or not."

Collaboration has always been part of the Tin Hat modus operandi. Faith No More singer Mike Patton appeared on "Infinito," the uncredited, eerie operatic final cut of *Memory Is an Elephant*. Tom Waits sang the reprise of the title track on the group's second album, *Helium* (Angel). Clarinetist Goldberg sat in on the trio's very first gig at the Hotel Utah in San Francisco, California, and was one of many guest artists, including tuba

player Smith, harpist Parkins, percussionist Billy Martin (of Medeski, Martin, and Wood), and Willie Nelson (singing "Willow Weep for Me") on the group's third CD, *The Rodeo Eroded* (Ropeadope, www.ropeadope.com). In addition, Tin Hat has performed with a low brass ensemble, a 12-piece ensemble of strings and winds, and the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia (in Orton's as-yet-unreleased *Five Geographies*, a triple concerto for trio and 21 strings). "We're always looking to keep the sound fresh and see what we can do to mess with it," Orton says. "We're always experimenting with whether what we have remains Tin Hat. It's like the reverse of cutting off a dog's legs and asking when does it stop being a dog? We do it in an additive sense."

Indeed, Orton and Kihlstedt felt they needed to add two players to replace Burger, a terrifically versatile and in-demand instrumentalist who has appeared on more than three dozen recordings (including Norah Jones' *Come Away with Me*), released one solo album, and recently worked with Laurie Anderson, Rufus

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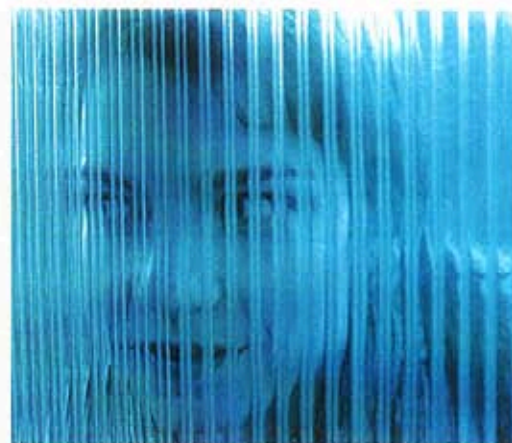
Wainwright, and producer Hal Willner (in his recent live presentations of "Come So Far for Beauty: An Evening of Leonard Cohen Songs.") "One reason for bringing in both Ben and Zeena," Kihlstedt explains, "is that Rob has such a strong personality as a keyboard player and has been such a part of the sound of the group that it would be difficult for any one person to step in and fill his shoes without feeling a weird kind of pressure."

"They're both great musicians," Orton says of Goldberg and Parkins. "And, as with Rob, the personal hang with them is great. We're really close. It's really fun. They're such exciting composers and im-

provisers, and both of them do what Tin Hat hopes to do in its best moments—blur this classical/jazz line and the improv/composition line and explode those kinds of definitions. The sound is going to be a little shifted from what people are used to hearing, a bit more experimental—more 'art center' and less 'rock club.'"

### 100 Proof

While Orton calls the new Tin Hat a "work in progress," both he and Kihlstedt confirm what seems obvious from the outside—that a signature sound has emerged over the years. The original trio's record-



ings have always defied classification. Orton once quipped that if the CDs were filed in a record store's pop section, you'd find them between Thin Lizzy and Tiny Tim, splitting the difference between "The Boys Are Back in Town" and "Tiptoe Through the Tulips." The unpredictable blends and juxtapositions of modern composition, free improvisation, and elements drawn from country, bluegrass, Hungarian folk dances, Brazilian *forro*, and Argentinean tango blurred categorical distinctions between classical, jazz, and world music.

"In the beginning of the band, it was pretty novel instrumentation for the three of us to play with," says Orton, referring to the acoustic admixtures that have included pump organ, viola, Dobro, banjo, and mandolin. "We were finding our footing in it. I don't think we were ever a very referential band, but we were closer to some of our influences back then. As time has gone by, that's not even the beginning of a consideration. Our footing has been found, and we've probably hopped away from it in several different directions."

"It's gotten a lot more distilled," adds Kihlstedt, "less sprawling and in some

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ways less flashy. The group has taken its ideas and made them more and more focused, so the dynamic range is really extreme, and things can get more subtle. The forms are shorter, in some ways closer to pop forms, with three- and four-minute song situations."

To some ears, *Book of Silk* (Ropeadope) sounds in places like the most explicitly emotional music Tin Hat has recorded to date. It's too easy to assume, however, that this can be traced to the shock of Orton's wife, Lauren, drowning in a white-water river-rafting accident in April 2003. "Some of the things that sound the saddest on the record [such as 'Lauren's Lullaby' and 'The Longest Night'] were written long before the tragedy," Orton points out, noting that only the final track, "Empire of Light," with lyrics by Mike Coykendall, sung by Kihlstedt, was direct-

much more comfortable playing rhythmic parts or comping underneath someone's solo. Before, my only experience had been melody playing. I went through a period of being just tired of the normal sounds, the normal kinds of parts you have to play on the violin. At that point you have two options: you either pick up a different instrument or stay with what you have and blow it up."

Even though Orton's guitar has usually been the least prominent instrument in the mix, he's well aware of the technical and expressive imperatives placed on him by the Tin Hat aesthetic. "I've been in this rhythm section-like role, and it's really de-

fined my guitar playing," he explains. "I'm still playing in the Old Joe Clarks [a Portland-based country-rock band] and playing some lap steel or whatever, but as a guitarist I don't think of the solo and the line anymore—I think of the harmonic structure and the bass line. That's something guitarists do occasionally, but that's my starting point. I think it's brought out different things on Dobro and banjo too, things that otherwise wouldn't have happened in an ensemble that has bass and drums. I think of myself as the rhythm section, and I tell the engineers when we walk into a club, 'Mix me like I'm drums and bass.'" "It's an ego thing," Kihlstedt inter-



ly inspired by Lauren's passing. "There's always been an emotional content in this band," Orton continues. "That is who we've been as composers all along. We are all drawn to emotional music. There's always been a comic element, too, and there still is on *Book of Silk*. But yeah, this one has some heavy stuff, definitely."

### Instrumental Imperatives

Orton and Kihlstedt have learned that putting on their Tin Hats places unique demands on them as players. Whether playing as a trio, quartet, or orchestra, staging a conventional concert or performing the innovative scores they've fitted to the early-20th-century silent insect animations of Russian film pioneer Ladislav Starewicz, they've had to come up with new approaches to their instruments. "We've each gotten better at crossing over into different roles in the trio," says Kihlstedt. "I've gotten

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jects, and Orton responds instantly, "Yeah, louder, louder! Turn up the kick, come on!"

Actually, instead of driving his licks to the foreground, Orton often muffles the sound of his guitar with right-hand damping. "That's a necessary thing," he explains, "because I have the guitar strung down so low that the strings are kind of floppy, and if I don't damp, it's actually quite floppy and weird sounding, especially in the lower strings, on the bass lines."

In the end, all the extended instrumental techniques and accommodations serve the overall Tin Hat sound, but

even as that changes, the commitment to a cohesive identity doesn't. "This group is so much more about blending and tone than anything else I do," says Kihlstedt. "It's more like chamber music in that way. I grew up playing string quartets, and the hardest thing to work on, beyond understanding the music and getting the notes, was to blend—to really make one sound out of those four instruments."

"One of the strengths of the band has been the seamless kind of sound that Carla and Rob have gotten," Orton says. "It's really fun as an arranger to be working with that. You get this dense orches-

tral texture out of those instruments, even though it's just the two of them. And from a composing and arranging standpoint, it's really fun to imagine the new instrumentation. Zeena is capable of such a huge range of sounds [on harp] because of all the preparations she does, she's such a great extended-technique player. The same with Ben—he's got a wild range of sounds on the clarinet. It speaks to the better part of what Tin Hat is that our playing is shaped by the idea that we're trying to facilitate the composition and the music, not necessarily the flashiest solo or the thing that everyone's going to go 'wow' over. It's not about that. There's something else that is first and foremost for us."

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## What They Play

Tin Hat guitarist **MARK ORTON**'s main instrument is an 1893 Martin 1-21 parlor guitar. It was built as a gut-string instrument, but luthier John Mello ([www.johnfmello.com](http://www.johnfmello.com)) did just enough restoration and structural reinforcement for it to handle steel strings. Orton favors Dean Markley Vintage Bronze or Blue Steel strings. He plucks with Jim Dunlop 47R nylon Jazz III picks, "the pointy ones," and when he switches to fingerstyle, he tucks the pick under the middle joint of his ring finger. Orton also owns a pair of Larrivée Parlor guitars that he takes on long-distance travel.

For amplification, he relies on Fishman Rare Earth humbucker pickups ("I don't want to do structural damage to the guitars in terms of ripping up the bridge and putting a transducer there") and an L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic DI. He also plays into a Schoeps MK4 cardioid condenser mic. Orton's Dobro is a 1937 square-neck that he bought in a pawnshop. Standard Dobro tuning is G B D G B D, but Orton tunes his G G D G B D, with the two lower Gs an octave apart. His banjos include a 1925 Bacon four-string tenor that he inherited from his grandmother, and a recently acquired Sam Sweeney five-string, gut-strung fretless minstrel banjo from the early 20th century. He uses Shubb capos and puts Long's Extra-Absorbent pipe cleaners between his strings when he plays prepared guitar.