

UP FRONT

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Talk to me

By Christopher Muther, Globe staff | April 14, 2005

'Can I have this tape?' asks Halsey Burgund, eyeing the clunky black RadioShack cassette recorder capturing his words. "I mean, when you're done with it, of course."

Even during an interview, Burgund is on the prowl for source material for his music. In addition to drums and keyboard, Burgund's instrument of choice is the human voice, talking. It could be his own voice, his mother's voice, or the voice of a complete stranger he stumbles across in an art gallery. During the past year he has collected dozens of voices and layered, chopped, and looped them, doing whatever he feels is necessary to make ordinarily mundane dialogue into a curious new style of music.

"There are these little moments of beauty happening all over the place," he says, excitedly extending his arms to show that the cacophonous voices currently swimming around his ears in a Cambridge restaurant somehow fit this definition. "I like the idea of looking for beauty in the everyday. When you're speaking, you're not singing, but what's the difference between speaking and singing?"

The voices that first spoke to the 31-year-old Burgund were, naturally, those of his parents. He was working on writing and performing songs in his Bedford home last year when he asked his visiting parents to read a poem he had written. He recorded the session and was taken with the uniqueness of their voices and the striking differences in their interpretations of the same words. He began layering the words over music, and the result of that recording session became the first track on his new album, "Words and Voices."

"I'm hesitant to say it was a eureka moment," he says. "But over the course of working on that song, I knew that there was really something going on there that was very exciting."

He was so taken with his spoken-word music that he dumped the conventional songs he was working on and made an entire album in this style, which ranges from spam e-mail words set to jazz-rock to the results of a personality test read over an electro-pop soundtrack. After recording his parents, Burgund quickly moved on to recording friends, co-workers, and virtually anyone else who entered his life. He realized he was about run out of fresh voices for his songs, so he tried randomly interviewing people on the street, but found they were uncomfortable with the idea of a stranger recording their voices. So he devised a way to make the experience seem more official, and more private: He built a booth he calls the Bring Your Own Voice booth.

Burgund, a former furniture maker, constructed the booth of plywood so it can be dismantled and assembled easily for portability. In a space the size of a large Viking refrigerator, people can privately record their voices for Burgund's future projects.

"It's both totally private and totally public at the same time," he explains. "It's like a confessional."

Tonight, the Bring Your Own Voice Booth will be set up at the Milky Way Lounge, where Burgund will celebrate the release of the album "Words and Music." Anyone is welcome to step inside and offer their voice. There's even a chance the recording session could end up on Burgund's next project.

"The booth, and these songs, is another way to connect with people," he says. "I think this whole project is about making connections. I'm happiest when one of my songs makes people feel something." ■