

Jason Kahn
Days Falling



Days Falling is a double LP release on Jason Kahn's *Editions* label. The album contains five improvised pieces for voice and acoustic guitar.

Jason Kahn (born 1960 New York) lives in Zürich. He works in the fields of improvised music, composition, visual art and written text.

Links

<http://jasonkahn.net>

http://jasonkahn.net/editions/catalog/days_falling.html

<https://jasonkahn.bandcamp.com>

<https://soundcloud.com/jasonkahn>

Interviewed by Jason Kahn

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Interviewer:

Tell us something about the title of this release?

Jason Kahn:

I was thinking of some lyrics from a Robert Johnson song, *Hellhound on My Trail*, where he sings:

I got to keep movin', I got to keep movin'

Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail

Hmm-mmm, blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail

*And the days keeps on worryin' me
There's a hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail
Hellhound on my trail*

I've always interpreted these lyrics as a statement of existential angst, that sense of time closing in on us, that *hellhound* being our mortality, death on our trail. Of course, I realize as a white person that I have the luxury of interpreting the lyrics this way, on a purely existential plane. Whereas I can imagine another component of Johnson's lyrics reflects his position as a black person in the United States at that time. He wasn't just dealing with the existential clock running out, his days slowly ticking away, but the actual bodily threat of trying to survive in an incredibly racist and violent social space. Not just at the hands of the entrenched racism in the Deep South but within his own social sphere as well, playing at juke joints, BBQs, house parties, bars, on the street. There was always the chance that something could go wrong, that he'd find himself talking in maybe too intimate a manner with someone's wife or girlfriend and wind up in an altercation because of this (supposedly the way he finally died) or just getting caught in the crossfire of other people's disputes. Basically this whole environment where alcohol, libido and the frustration of living trapped in a deadly social system came together on the dance floor. Sometimes it could be a party, but perhaps more often than not there could be trouble.

And so I thought of *days falling*, instead of *blues falling*. I recorded this album during the peak of the Covid pandemic and I actually had the sense of the days falling around me, piling up like drifts of snow. With death on my trail. Every day the empty streets, the sirens, a sense of panic and uncertainty spreading around the globe. I experienced this existential threat of the days falling away and death moving closer and closer to my door.

Interviewer:

And indeed in his review of the album, the French writer Guillaume Bonhomme cited as references Robert Johnson, Kan Mikami and Jandek. Do you feel a kinship with these artists? How do you position yourself in the tradition of the blues?

Jason Kahn:

Well, I would never go so far as to say that I can play the blues, that I'm a blues musician. I think that I have too much respect for this tradition to claim to be a part of it. But what I do feel a part of, and what has always drawn me back to the blues time and time again, is the sense of confronting the basic human condition, which is that one day we will no longer be here. Our days are counted. And for me, this sense of *memento mori* lends a clarity and focus to my work and, indeed, just managing to make it through each day. I guess this might sound dramatic but I mean it in more a mundane sense: to just to try and live in the moment because this is all we have.

But beyond blues artists there have been so many other people which bring me a similar feeling: Ferdinand Celine, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Albertine Sarrazin... The list is virtually endless because I'm always discovering something new, or rediscovering myself anew in the work of others.

Interviewer:

Sam Shepard, both in the titles of the pieces and in your liner notes, seems to be one of these influences.

Jason Kahn:

Yes, I guess you could say Sam Shepard embodies for me all these influences I've mentioned here: the blues, Beckett, existentialism. And beyond all this a lust for life, that sense of having to move, to just go. Do something, be somewhere, feel, go beyond. Like the word painted on the front of Ken Kesey's school bus, *further*. But maybe in Shepard's case going further meant contemplating one's roots, ultimately staying put and going deeper into that feeling of somehow belonging but also being outside of it all. Like the proverbial *exile on main street*.

For these reasons Sam Shepard came to mind when I finally sat down and gave these recordings a listen. Of course, I didn't have to come up with titles. But the material made me think of Shepard, whose work in any case I had been rereading again since he died in 2017. He was just on my mind, perhaps subconsciously so when I made these recordings. It's hard to say how the creative process works for me. Life is just a mystery sometimes (probably most of the time).

Interviewer:

You mention in the liner notes of almost coincidentally making these recordings. That they weren't planned but that the session just came together, almost on a whim.

Jason Kahn:

I think this is mostly how I work in general. I tend to just start working on something when I feel the urge. I rarely plan anything out. It just so happened that during all the lock downs I was playing acoustic guitar at home most evenings, more as a way of releasing tension from the day than practicing or preparing for anything. And after a few months of this I thought, why not try to capture this moment? A kind of field recording of the soul. Just a snapshot of this space in time. If nothing else to merely serve as an artifact of this period, more for me to remember it by. Like finding an unmailed letter stuck between the pages of some book. One day you come across this and there's a rush of memory taking you back to the time this letter was written.

I went into the Kunstraum Walcheturm and basically just did what I had been doing at home for the previous months. The only difference being, at home I couldn't really project my voice like I did on these recordings in the Kunstraum Walcheturm. I had a lot of bottled-up emotion in me—probably more than I'd realized before going in to record—that just came out when I started to sing during the recording session. It was just a very organic process, without much forethought or preparation.

And for this reason I really didn't even give the recordings a listen after they were done. I just transferred the files to my computer and there they sat for nearly a year. The process of making the recordings was the most important thing for me. Beyond this I wasn't even sure if I had any use for them. I didn't really even feel the need to hear what I had done.

But then in the beginning of 2021 I came across the recordings on my computer and decided to give them a listen. And I realized that I had captured a very special atmosphere. Truly that sense

of a *desolation row*, documenting my relation to the world and my own spiritual landscape. Though the recordings are obviously very personal I also felt they offered something more universal, a statement on the human condition. Reviewer Frans de Waard wrote about the album, *It is also about chaos and madness, a cry for freedom if you want*. It is this cry for freedom which I heard so clearly in these recordings. This is something I feel we can all relate to.

Interviewer:

What do you think the reviewer meant by *a cry for freedom*? Freedom from what?

Jason Kahn:

Exactly. This is one of those terms that gets bandied about so often, as if everyone knows what it's supposed to be referring to. And, of course, for each of us freedom has a different meaning. For me, and for what I get from Robert Pete Williams or Henri Chopin or William S. Burroughs, it's the freedom to transcend the human condition.

Or, as Tymon Dogg sang in *Lose This Skin*

I've got to lose this skin I'm imprisoned in.

I've got to lose this skin I'm imprisoned in.

How can we break this mortal coil? Contemplate our end with clarity and acceptance?

And on the level of artistic practice, how can we have the freedom to express what we want? To go against our own expectations and take a risk, not being afraid to fail. I think this is what helped me begin to work with the voice in the first place. At first there was an impulse, something more than just a wish but really a strong desire. Like I had to do this. And from that point I had to then overcome a sense of danger, like I could fall flat on my face and make a fool of myself. Not knowing where this could take me or if that place this did take me just ended up being nowhere. And then realizing that even a nowhere, a non-place is also a destination. And that perhaps in the end the destination isn't even really that important. We just need the freedom to follow our path, wherever it may take us. Or as a reviewer from my solo vocal performance at a festival in Poland a few years back wrote, *Convincingly showing the nature of human physicality and its limits*. Though I would add to this, the nature of human spirituality. And in this sense, I think if we follow our path with honesty, humility and resolve we can never fail.

Interviewer:

You mention the idea of failure here. When is there failure, success? Are these terms even relevant for what you're trying to do?

Jason Kahn:

Obviously, *failure* is a very harsh word. Certainly as harsh as *success*. Or perhaps it's this whole binary way of approaching things which is actually harsh. What if we step outside the context where these terms gain their energy? What if we just think about what makes our work relevant, emotionally powerful, intellectually stimulating? Or what if we don't think about any of these things and we just try to stay as true as possible to what moves us forward, what inspires us?

Keeping an eye on our lodestar and not worrying about anything else. I think this last option is where I'm at. I can only hope in the end that this results in work which draws people in and gives me the opportunity to share what I've done in the form of performances, recordings, written text or exhibitions.

Interviewer:

The playing and singing on the record is very raw. One could almost say primitive in the sense of *art brut* or a kind of imaginary folk music. Is this an aesthetic stance?

Jason Kahn:

In the late 1970's I began going to punk rock shows in Los Angeles, which is where I grew up. Before this, I had mainly experienced stadium rock groups. And I always left these stadium shows feeling a bit in awe of the whole spectacle but also somewhat depressed, because in the glare of all these pompous and virtuosic musicians I couldn't see any hope for me of ever becoming a musician. And this even though I felt a deep connection to music, had the feeling deep down that I could one day make music myself. And then I started going to punk rock shows, seeing people on stage who looked like me, people who had a lot of energy and soul and ideas but who couldn't necessarily play their instruments very well in the commonly accepted sense. They possessed just enough instrumental technique to express what they wanted to say. It seemed like they were learning in public, on stage right before my very eyes. And I felt a part of this process, lending my energy and support to what they were trying to do.

I realize that I'm not a master guitarist in any sense of the word. But I feel like I am able to express what I want on the instrument. This isn't to say that I'm completely satisfied with my abilities—I'm not, I always want to learn more—but I don't want to allow a lack of technique to stop me from trying to express myself. I feel deep, honest expression will always transcend technique every time.

The same holds for my singing, if one could call it that. I prefer *vocalization*, which might sound a bit pretentious but this isn't the way I mean it. More that I have vocal chords, breath and air pressure and these combine to create sounds—vocalizations. When I first started using my voice I was coming from a background as an electronic musician. I wanted to approach the voice like I worked with my synthesizer and mixing board. Looking for those breaking points, testing the limits of what I could physically do. Later, I realized the voice could be more than a sonic vehicle, used as a way of testing the social space of each performance. Putting myself in a vulnerable position, very much in a sense naked before the audience. These were solo voice performances, with nothing between me and the listeners. Performing with the guitar sets up a buffer zone, not exactly something to hide behind but placing me one step back from being completely laid bare before the listeners. In a strange way the guitar also lends an air of credibility to what I'm doing even though, as I wrote in the liner notes, *I had no songs to sing*.

Interviewer:

Why would you want to attain some sort of credibility? What does this even refer to in this context? When is someone not credible?

Jason Kahn:

I'm not interested in being credible or actually in being anything at all. My position is purely expressive, regardless of how this is understood by the listener. But the fact remains, a musical instrument is still a musical instrument. Which is to say, I could just as easily build a box and attach some steel wires to it and use that. Or any other so-called *non-musical* object. But the point is, I want to work with this concept of *music*. To actually play a musical instrument as it was more or less intended to be played, not just use it as an abstract sound object. There is this tension between seeing me with a guitar and using my voice the way I do and the expectation of what this normally should be. I don't see this as a provocation or being ironic. Rather, I want to push the boundaries of how we experience this idea of what music is.

But beyond this, I do love playing the guitar. I do practice. I'm interested in all the conventional aspects which we have attached to the idea of music making. But I want to see for myself how far I can stretch the idea of what we understand music to be.

Interviewer:

This seems like a redundant position. I mean, we already have John Cage, Marcel Duchamp. Art is what one claims it to be, whether a pissoir or bicycle wheel on a stool. Or, in the words of Cage, *You don't have to call it music if the term shocks you.*

Jason Kahn:

In a sense, this is true. There should be no need to rehash all these old discussions. It *should* be redundant but it's not. I'm interested in that space between what is construed as music and what we could consider art. I'm not interested in a meta music, rather in seeing the concept of music become more inclusive, more open to freer ways of thinking about what it means to be a musician, to make music. I think this is the reason, and one of the aspects of Cage's work which I really admired, that he continued to refer to himself as a composer. He never said he was a *sound artist*. He was a composer and he was, as far as I understand his practice, interested in expanding the concept of what it meant to compose, to make music, to listen to music.

Even in the musical contexts I often find myself in (free improvisation, experimental composition) there are so many boundaries, so many unspoken ways things should be done—even with everyone saying we are all free, we can all do what we want. In my experience this is often not the case at all.

Interviewer:

How do you construct this space you find yourself in? To my ears, this sounds more like being lost, searching for something in the fog, just beyond your grasp. How can you maintain a constructive and positive stance in this unstable condition? Isn't life already difficult enough without piling on more uncertainty?

Jason Kahn:

I'm interested in the ideas of disturbance, resistance and interference—social concepts transposed to the context of sound and music. And these ideas give me the strength and motivation to move forward. The space I find myself in can't exist beyond concepts. And in a sense, this space is the actual medium I'm working with, something beyond sound or music or art or politics. How can we affect change in ourselves and others through exploring counter flows? How can we expand the space we find ourselves in by challenging it, by testing the limits and boundaries of what we thought was acceptable or even possible?

To just make music is a wonderful proposition. For many people music offers succor in times of physical and spiritual distress. This is great. But I'm also interested in the origins of our consciousness and how we can expand this, how can we find new ways of approaching the social spaces we find ourselves navigating in our daily lives. Sometimes feeling trapped or overwhelmed, other times enjoying a sense of freedom as we transcend our limits or the boundaries imposed on us by ourselves or others. This is what inspires me to pursue music, to keep on saying, *I'm a musician*. Life is difficult, overwhelming, really too much sometimes. But the energy of music and the communication it allows between myself and others overrides any sense of, as you put it here, being lost in the fog. Being lost is not necessarily a bad thing. There is always a way forward. Despair is all we need to overcome.

Interviewer:

But isn't it perhaps easy, given your position, to say despair is all we need to overcome? I mean, you're white, male. You live in Switzerland. It's not as if you have a lot of material problems to contend with or that you're in a situation where your skin color creates a set of preconceived negative assumptions about what kind of person you are.

Jason Kahn:

Absolutely, I completely agree. And I've had the opportunity to present my work in countries where acute poverty and political inequity are the order of the day. I grew up in the United States where, let's face it, racism is still rampant. It's gotten better there in my lifetime but massive problems still exist. I've read about this dialogue in the black community, where in the 1960's when free jazz was taking hold, there was a lot of discussion about how this work pertained to the *movement*, as the political discourse was referred to back then. How did work like this contribute to the struggle for equality within the social space at that time? I've been reading a book of texts, *Writing in Space*, by the black American artist Lorraine O'Grady, whose family immigrated to the United States from Jamaica. And she recounts having been told by black political activists that *avant garde art has nothing to do with black people*.

So really, the situation here is relative. There will always be this dynamic of how we perceive the social function of art, regardless of our social class or ethnic background. I believe a focus on the existential or spiritual can contribute just as much to a struggle for equality as a purely political stance. And I think both positions are relevant and important. This is not an either/or proposition, rather both/and.

Interviewer:

Getting back to your new album, how do you see this work in the trajectory of what you've done before, what you plan on pursuing next? You move not just between different instruments (voice, guitar, drum set, electronics) but various disciplines (writing, visual art, composition, improvisation)? Where is the focus in all of this?

Jason Kahn:

I've often asked myself these same questions, especially when I first started working with electronics. I worried that I wouldn't have the time to maintain a high level of skill on the drum set, my main instrument at the time. Which also happened to be my main source of income, as I lived from playing drums in different projects, being known as a drummer. But what I ultimately realized about working with electronics was how it freed me from the construct of technique. I could now concentrate more fully on just *ideas*. There was no level of motoric function—in common parlance, *chops*—I had to maintain in order to work with electronics. And beyond this, I saw that when I came back to the drum set how certain concepts I had been focusing on with electronics could now be applied to my work with drumming. All these disciplines fed off each other. Again, this wasn't a question of either/or but both/and.

Days Falling is another step in this trajectory. It's not as if I'm only a guitarist now. Or vocalist. Or just anything. I feel musicians get associated too closely with the instrument they play, whereas I feel we should place more emphasis on the person. Because this is what I hear behind the instrument, behind the score. Get from a visual work of art or text. It's the humanity I'm interested in. Who is that person behind the work?