



## **Joanna Mattrey – Dirge**

Interview with Kenny Warren

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**Kenny Warren:** I keep returning to your record **Dirge** which came out in September 2021. To borrow a phrase from Flin van Hemmen, it really casts a spell. Thanks for agreeing to talk about it. How do your Alexander Technique, Yoga and Martial Arts practices relate to your music?

**Joanna Mattrey:** I think I've always been a very spiritual person, and I deeply believe in the unity of the mind/body/spirit. My music practice is fundamentally about communicating through a unified self. My intention is that my entire being is supporting the same message; the same impulse. I was raised in a very religious household, and I had many powerful spiritual experiences as a young person, and as I left home and moved away from that belief system, I realized I had almost no connection to my body, if anything I had ignored and condemned the natural impulses of my body. At music school, I became injured with tendonitis and a fellow violist sent me to an Alexander Technique teacher.

I became completely obsessed and joined a training course after graduation. With AT, I tangibly experienced the flow of the life force and realized that my early spiritual experiences weren't due to a belief in a particular system, but to the completely amazing experience of being human! The viola is a vibrating body, and when I hold the instrument to play, if I have a lot of muscular tension, then I literally dampen the resonance of my instrument. I, too, am a vibrating body, and if I can get all the elements of a Joanna to vibrate together, then my resonance will be that much stronger, clearer, and more meaningful. I continue to study Yoga and Martial Arts and all my studies support each other and help me become a better learner and a more whole person.

**KW:** I love the circular flow of these pieces. They seem to be somehow static and pulsing at the same time. Can you talk about breathing as it relates to your music?

**JM:** I love the idea of a long line that moves through the music. I believe we, as performers, imbue the sound with our spiritual energy, and that energy is what connects us to listeners. The longer we can maintain that continuous energetic connection to the sound, the longer the line is. I also believe that, sometimes when you bring enough energy to the line, it mysteriously comes alive! Then, it is the job of the performer to surrender control of the line, and simply allow it to be and to follow it, through moments of stasis and storms. This is a kind of duality, a call and response, an extreme listening internally, while sending the sound externally. As in breathing, the mechanism flows in both directions.

**KW:** What was the recording process like with Nathaniel Morgan?

**JM:** Nathaniel! An epic musician, a seance unto himself! Nathaniel was a very formative influence on me when I began improvising. He is so wise! I remember him saying that if he ever felt too comfortable, or too secure while improvising, that he was doing something wrong. I remember him defiantly, not playing at all in an entire set because he felt the sound just didn't need anything else, it didn't need him, so he didn't play! No ego- no need to prove anything. That guy just has limitless depth. One of the best solos I've heard recently was Nathaniel's solo on Anna Webber's album, *Idiom*. Everyone in the studio was like, damn dude! Stunned. As an engineer, he really captures all the resonance of my instrument, I feel the sound is always healthy and alive. His presence in the space is the perfect amount of listening, and detachment. I feel both the abandon of playing alone in my room, and the joy of sharing my sounds with a supportive listener.

**KW:** How has your concept/approach evolved over time?

**JM:** Initially improvisation was a practice of connecting with myself. Finding all the colors and moods I had inside, and forging a direct link to expressing them. From there, finding a connection with an ensemble. Blending with others to create unity, which is such a satisfying, reassuring, and grounding truth. Continuing to expand the connection to include the listening energy of the audience. Playing solo sets has been a great catalyst for my music practice because I think it's the performer's job to give the audience an experience that takes them out of themselves. Music has a vast power to cut through the barriers that divide us all, creating the experience of togetherness. In these states, I have glimpses of communing with something even greater than our collective selves in the room. With my recent release *Dirge*, the brash sounds of the stroh violin and it's antique character inspired a folk approach to the pieces on the record. I am drawn to folk music as an underlying, timeless, universal, human experience of sound. Using the pitches and tonal relationships that occur most naturally through the overtone series and finding what sounds any person at any time might have heard as the wind rustles through the valley, through the trees, as water drips on stone. I imagine those experiences naturally leading to the simple melodies and scales that pervade many culture's approaches to their traditional music, and I'm interested in connecting my music to that natural human impulse to resonate with those sounds.

**KW:** What are you excited about/inspired by right now?

**JM:** As I type this, I'm drinking coffee in Mexico City- in full post-show glow after a few epic nights of performances. The simple joy of being amongst a very deep community of artists and poets and musicians, it just feels so right! I'm feeling very lucky to experience the global improv community. The free improv/contemporary music community is so vibrant, so supportive, brave and vast! I'm deeply inspired by all the other creatives that fuel these communities. I feel the expansive, far reaching

power of this music, and I feel grateful for all the places, internal and external, that playing this music has brought me.

**KW:** Recording can be a way to archive live work, but it's also the creation of an artistic object in and of itself. There are different possibilities in recorded music than in live performance, but to what extent those other the dimension are utilized is up to the artist. What is your relation to recording in general?

**JM:** Recording to me is primarily archival work, preserving my output at the time, and charting the different areas that I journey towards in my sound. I feel between my first two albums that my relationship to melody changed a lot. I allowed myself to play tonally and melodically, which is a space that I didn't really connect to in my improvisation practice before *Dirge*. I definitely approach recording differently than I would a live performance, so in that way, there is even more room for the compositional mind to speak. I often aim to capture certain sounds or feelings during recording, and definitely consider length in a totally different way than with performance. I also love the idea of an artifact. So much of what we do is a gesture towards the ether, or movement of energy. A recording is something different. It is a concrete statement. I find it a companion practice to performance. The two actions support each other and push me to be a better musician.

**KW:** What is your relationship with the other artists on this recording, and what gave you the idea to collaborate with them on an otherwise solo recording?

**JM:** While every track is not solo, the album encompasses my work as a solo artist. The amazing colleagues that I got to include on the record were carefully curated by me to showcase different aspects of my sounds and to fulfill a kind of aesthetic cohesion, which served my vision for the record. I also came into the collaborations with pretty clear compositional direction and intention that I sought out and brought about with these collaborations. Since those initial duo pairings, the collaborations have grown into their own projects with their own trajectories outside of my initial instinct. Cleek Schrey and I have since collaborated in many projects and it definitely feels like our work on *Dirge* was the beginning of a massive body of work that is growing into an amazing string quartet with Henry Fraser, bass and Aliya Ultan, cello, and allowed us to deeply explore our own compositions. Steven Long and I are currently working on an entire duo album based around the kind of slow churning, minimal material we found with the track *Lazulum*, to be released in January 2023 as a follow-up album with Dear Life Records. Chaz Knapp and I continue our collaboration and released a new track with Industrial Coast, and are venturing deeper into the world of Folk Song. More in the works!

**KW:** To what extent did you have specific plans and ideas before recording?

**JM:** I had the impulse to try to make a folk album while maintaining a connection to my playing style. Playing the stroh, with its brash, metallic, twangy timbre, summons an old fashioned victrola sound that I just love, and makes me feel like playing a sweet and sad little secret folk song. The title, *Dirge*, also has significance for me. I thought a lot about the function of a musician a lot during that time, when we were all far away from shows. Sometimes you get caught up with the busyness of playing a million shows and gigs and listening to everyone else's gigs and it kind of starts to feel like we make music for musicians. When musicians could no longer connect with each other in that way, I wondered about the role we would have played in a community. I believe our domain, as musicians and artists, was historically to be there for the parties, for the rituals, for births and deaths, for the changing of the seasons, or to commemorate something significant. Ritual means a lot to me in my

personal practice, as I strongly connect performance to a no-mind kind of meditative state, but that's still not music's function. Musicians serve the community and help people to feel things that they may not allow themselves to feel, or know how to feel. We gather everyone into the same moment of the music, and in that space, we can know togetherness. We heighten the spiritual aspect of the experience, and people need us for that. Dirge is a lament for change, loss, and memory.



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