

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Talk into tune

When Toronto musician Charles Spearin asked his neighbours about happiness, he didn't just listen to their answers - he turned them into songs

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As a piano-trumpet duo skitters around her, a person with a pleasant professional accent talks about her work with “challenged young women” who tell her “all the time” that they're happy. “Some of their expectations are so simplistic – not to say simplicity because they're challenged ... ”

Then the thought strikes: “It's like they don't ask beyond of what's present.” Immediately the voice repeats: “It's like they don't ask beyond of what's present.” And again: “It's like they don't ask beyond of what's present.”

At which point the music makes its own breakthrough. Keyboard and horn link arms with bass and drums and kick out a chorus to the precise tune and tempo of the woman's words. You can almost see her with brass band and challenged charges on parade through New Orleans, fanfaring their be-here-now anthem – sing it, sister! – *It's Like They Don't Ask Beyond of What's Present!*

This is *Anna*, Track 2 of *The Happiness Project*, the first solo album by Toronto musician Charles Spearin, which was released yesterday.

Actually, solo is a misnomer. A multi-instrumentalist with tight-knit space-rock ensemble Do Make Say Think as well as that legions-strong study in socio-rockology, the popular band Broken Social Scene, Spearin prefers company – in this case, his whole neighbourhood. For this album, he started by asking over acquaintances he'd made playing in the yard with his kids for taped conversations about happiness.

“In a way, happiness is an easy thing to invite your neighbours to talk about – better than politics or religion,” says Spearin, 35, over tea in the well-appointed house he shares with his wife and two young daughters near Dupont and Bathurst. “I thought it would bring out interesting stories.”

He and his musical friends pored over the interviews – with a sagely cheery Caribbean-Canadian lady, a deaf person whose hearing was restored, a reflective East Asian man, petulant children – for the underlying cadences, tracking them note for note.

“My neighbours did the hard work of coming up with the melodies,” Spearin says (maybe it's the earnestly blond western mustache or yogically upright posture, but his tongue does not seem in cheek). “I just listened for them, then did the arrangements.”

He joins a fast-growing field. Probing the space between talk and tune goes back to the ancient Hindu Vedas, African “talking drums,” operatic recitative and Dada sound poetry. But lately digital sampling and looping have made it much simpler. New York composer Scott Johnson was probably the first (with *John Somebody*, 1982) to fully harmonize taped speech with instruments.

Minimalist Steve Reich matched Holocaust testimony to string quartet on *Different Trains* (1988). And guitarist René Lussier paid homage to Quebec culture with his stereo-francophonic tour de force, *Le Trésor de la langue* (1990).

In this decade, jazz artists such as pianist Jason Moran and sax player Rudresh Mahanthappa have drawn on linguistics to limn the multicultural bop of globalization. And in 2008, with his *Yes We Can* video of celebrities singing along to the crests and dips of a Barack Obama speech, will.i.am of the Black-Eyed Peas brought it to YouTube, electoral politics and mainstream pop. (You might argue it was already there, given hip hop's stylized speech and samples.)

California psychologist Diana Deutsch has researched the “speech-to-song illusion,” in which any fragment of dialogue played back repeatedly comes to sound like song. Think of the Beatles' *musique-concrete* experiment on the *White Album*, where the recurring words “number 9, number 9” turn into a chant. She speculates that it's only because the brain needs to prioritize intelligible content that we don't constantly hear speech as music. Imagine coping with that vast human chorale of mini-cantatas, arias and blues.

Spearin, however, had more personal motivations. Growing up, he witnessed his civil-servant father slip into blindness and became highly conscious of what it would be like to navigate mainly by sound. (The Braille on his CD cover is a reminder.) Another paternal inheritance is Buddhism, and Spearin used to go on an annual month-long meditation retreat. “There's something about coming back to the regular world after not speaking for long periods of time,” he says. “You pay attention to people's voices in a different way.”

He began to be struck by the city's soundscapes, from a tree of starlings to a café crowd. And while this record is many things – including testimony to the health of a diverse urban community, in defiance of outside stereotypes – it's particularly an extension of the Buddhist concern with suffering and happiness. Indeed, he found that heeding sound can be a meditative practice.

“You're not listening to your thoughts so much if you hear your footsteps as you walk down the street,” he says. “The obsession with your life, what you did yesterday, what you're doing tomorrow, the running commentary and discursive thoughts – you can kind of let that go. ... It's allowing your mind to, I don't know, vent a little bit.”

In that sense, while many of his neighbours' responses to the question of happiness resonate – like the proclamation by “Mrs. Morris” (all the pieces are named after their subjects) that “happiness is love” – Spearin's own answer is the project itself. “If you're listening to the world with fresh ears, looking with fresh eyes and looking for those moments that kind of wake you up – that's what gives you happiness.”

Once again, science is with him: The booming field of positive psychology (“happiness studies”) is finding that contentment depends less on wealth and achieved goals than on attention to and gratitude for the day-to-day – what Anna on his album calls “what's present,” which one might call a gift.

In his neighbours' gift of time and talk, Spearin has rediscovered a formula from an old Irish parable: Which music, it asks, is the best in the world? “The music of what happens.”

*Charles Spearin and friends perform The Happiness Project on March 11 and 12 at the Music Gallery in Toronto and on March 13 at Il Motore in Montreal.*

