

"Music can be an amazingly potent thing," says **Matt Hales**, aka **Aqualung**. "When I sing into the microphone in the studio, I'm whispering my secrets in people's ears. When it connects, it can be so powerful. It's still a remarkable process to me."

Indeed, in a field crowded with empty shouting, *Words and Music* - the English singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist/producer's fourth album (and third U.S. release) under his longstanding nom de disc Aqualung - has the feeling of a series of deep emotional truths whispered in confidence. An effortlessly intimate set of subtly crafted, organically melodic tunes with openhearted lyrics and spare, mostly acoustic arrangements, *Words and Music* features some of Hales' most compelling work to date. Such subtly soulful tunes as "7 Keys," "Arrivals," "Good Goodnight" and "When I Finally Get My Own Place" balance adult emotional insight and childlike wonder, and are squarely in the tradition of such introspective pop auteurs as **Brian Wilson** and **Paul Simon**. Not coincidentally, Simon's '70s classic "Slip Sliding Away" receives a poignant interpretation from Hales on the album.

Words and Music - which Hales co-produced with his brother and musical right-hand man **Ben**, who also provides guitar, bass and harmony vocals, and co-wrote several songs - is the product of an extended period of soul-searching that caused the artist to seriously reexamine his career priorities, after a life that's been spent making music.

Hales began writing songs at the age of four and won a music scholarship at 16, and soon saw his classical symphony *Life Cycle* performed by a 60-piece orchestra. He later achieved a modicum of U.K. notoriety with a pair of British rock combos, **Ruth** and **The 45's**, but eventually grew weary of band life. Hales began recording as Aqualung in 2002, and achieved some unexpected early success when his demo of the song "Strange and Beautiful" appeared in a Volkswagen TV commercial and immediately struck a chord with listeners. That fluke occurrence turned Aqualung from a modest lo-fi bedroom recording project into a successful major-label act.

Hales' first two U.K. albums, *Aqualung* and *Still Life* were combined to create Aqualung's first U.S. release *Strange and Beautiful*, which became a substantial stateside hit. Meanwhile, Hales demonstrated the flexibility of his songcraft by presenting his music in a variety of live formats, from solo piano performances to gigs with a four-piece band to concerts with a 17-person ensemble. The conflicting emotions generated by Hales' unexpected mainstream success were reflected in 2007's *Memory Man*, a densely packed, largely electronic meditation on the disconnection and dislocation that Hales was feeling at the time. Those emotions left the lifelong musician and songwriter unsure of whether he wanted to continue as a recording artist.

"I'd been on the road for about three years, and I was as unwell and as unhappy as I've ever been," he recalls. "I thought, 'This is absolutely ridiculous, how can this be the result of success?' I felt like I was completely done, and like I had to stop. So I came home and hung out with my family and got busy producing and writing for other people, and had a think about what I might do next. But then I started to write some songs, and I eventually came back to realizing how much I would miss it if I gave it up. I realized that I just had to find a way to carry on, but on my own terms."

Eventually, Hales and his brother Ben began cutting unfussed, stripped-down recordings in Matt's home studio, with little thought of releasing them to the public. "It was really me and my brother sitting at home in London, just seeing what would

happen if we tried out this sound or this tone. Initially, we were just playing around with new versions of old songs, but then I started writing new songs, and it grew and grew, and at some point it started feeling like a record.

"I wasn't really expecting anyone to want to release it, to be honest," Hales adds. "It was really more of an experiment for me, because after having made a deliberately synthetic record with *Memory Man*, I was reacting against that and wanting to make something that was entirely organic and furry."

The almost-accidental nature of *Words and Music*'s birth cycle is consistent with the unpremeditated manner in which Aqualung first came into being, and Hales is happy to be returning to his D.I.Y. roots. "Ever since I began making music," he says, "my best work has come from a sense of feeling at home and connected and grounded and safe and happy. And this record, which was made without any external pressures or timetables or plan, came from that place, and connected me back to that. Listening to it, I feel relieved and rescued."

"I nearly called this album *Heart Songs*, because that's sort of what they are," Hales notes. "*Memory Man* was completely a head record, but *Words and Music* is all heart. It barely *has* a head; it's basically just a heart and a grin. There's something about the spirit of these recordings that feels like the start of something new. I don't know exactly where it will take me, but it will be very interesting to find out."