

## Interview: Rachel Grimes

By Sara Brickner in Interview

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Rachel Grimes

Pianist Rachel Grimes, a former leader of the now-defunct Louisville/Chicago indie chamber group Rachel's, plays a solo concert tonight in the Chapel Performance Space at the Good Shepherd Chapel at 8 p.m. tonight as part of the Earshot Jazz Festival. After addressing the human relationship with urban spaces on her 2003 album *Systems/Layers*, Grimes focuses her attentions inward on her new solo piano album, *Book of Leaves*. An exercise in quietude, *Book of Leaves* requires very little effort for the listener to concentrate on the music - which not only speaks to Grimes' ability and intentions as a composer, but also to the power that silence has achieved in a world that has become over-saturated with noise. And anyone who still buys into the old Pete Townshend maxim that volume is power need look no further than *Book of Leaves* for an example of just how absorbing - and commanding - tranquility

can be in art.

From her Louisville home, Grimes spoke to SW correspondent Saby Reyes-Kulkarni about concentration, space, respectful audiences, and slow food. An edited transcript follows.

**SW:** What is it about Erik Satie's work that inspired you to want to present it alongside music from your new solo album?

**RG:** There's something in particular that is mysteriously timeless about his music that seems more relevant all the time. I really can't put a finger on what that is. I think it has to do with his use of silence and spaces in the music, his slightly unpredictable use of repetition, and his tonal language. And also he was always coming to writing music from the angle of multiple disciplines. He was always making music with visual artists, sculptors, theatre directors, choreographers, etc. His music has other elements that come through the music that are instantly visual and descriptive of a time and place. So I feel that a lot of the things that characterize his music are also

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present on Book of Leaves. I've always been interested in the ways that music can conjure other imagery, places, and stories. It's going to be a quiet evening, for sure! [Laughs.] But the Satie is different enough that I think it'll be an interesting comparison, because the works are about a hundred years apart.

**SW:** How much of a challenge is it to hold the attention of a listener in a live setting with one instrument, especially in a time when we're so accustomed to pairing music literally with visuals?

**RG:** It's challenging, which is why I'm playing shows at venues that are focused on listening and are intimate in size and nature and can provide a quality instrument. One of the reasons it's taken me a while to get this record finished is that it's difficult to get into a recording environment with a Steinway grand piano. [Laughs.] I was determined to have a Steinway because it's a profoundly gorgeously engineered instrument. The 9-foot pianos create complex sounds that just can not be matched with a 6-foot Yamaha, no matter what kind of effects you put on it. The actual sound quality of the piano is so much what this record is about. I hope that people that come to these shows are ready to be involved in that and put on their listening ears and listen for, not only the music as it's coming to them, but the actual sound and what that does for their body and their mind. I purposely haven't planned any visual accompaniment so that people can relax and go to their own place. But it is a patient kind of evening. The Seattle show in particular is a rather perfect combination of venue, promoter, room and piano. [Local promoter] Steve [Peters, organizer of the Wayward Music Series] is very dedicated to the idea of a listening-oriented evening, so I'm very much looking forward to that.

**SW:** For listeners who aren't familiar with classical music, the conservatory world, or so-called chamber pop, besides the obvious fact that you performance features original compositions, how does the mood at your shows differ from a classical solo piano recital?

**RG:** I hope it's more approachable and more adventurous. They're coming to hear something that's new and is being expressed by the person who's bringing it into the world. I think that brings a certain immediacy and even casualness to a performance. People may be familiar with the Rachel's records, but there isn't two hundred years of over-analysis coming into the door. Also, this album is very tonally approachable. It's not incredibly difficult or challenging to hear the first time.

**SW:** Our lives have become noisy and loud on many levels - including visually, and in our own thoughts. I'm wondering if the pendulum hasn't swung in a direction where calm in music will grab people with the same force that, in the past, composers and musicians would resort to noise and abrasion to achieve.

**RG:** That would be exciting, because it's certainly the direction that I have gone. Not to say that I don't have other projects that have a much more dense texture and volume range, but part of the reason that I created this music, and where it really came from, was from a sense of being over-saturated and over-taxed by an external environment that is just unrelenting with stimulus. I have realized, sort of by accident, that I'm not actually an extrovert. I spend a lot of time inside, and inside my thoughts. I don't need to be constantly stimulated by outside sources. I never listen to music while doing something else. I'm either listening to music or I'm doing something else. Once in a while there's some Cuban music while I'm cooking. But I don't have the television on ever. I don't really like to be in crowds. I'm trying to

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don't have the television on ever. I don't really like to be in crowds. I'm trying to offer people some quieter solace, some more focused, gentler experience for their attention. It is an incredibly over-saturated culture, and it gets very exhausting what to put your attention towards. Hopefully, this'll reach people that need that break.

**SW:** You're a proponent of slow food. The connection with the album seems obvious but fair - because for someone to take this music in for 45 minutes... it's not something you scarf down, nibble track by track, or eat some and put the rest away in the fridge. It's more like a soup, where you sit and take the time to digest. You can also draw an analogy between the straightforward recording style and rustic cuisine where you just go out to the back garden to pick herbs and ingredients to cook with.

**RG:** Slow food and my music are so connected. The other thing I do with my life is I spend a lot of time outdoors with plants. My husband and I have spent about four years now at our farm in the country trying to bring the land back to a functioning place. We're trying to move there. Through all of that work and experiencing that learning curve that we've learned what we can expect in what kind of time. It's an experience that's quite old. The amount of patience I've had to maintain just to get this thing finished has been pretty great. Patience has been the undercurrent. It's such a part of growing food and making quality food. There's been an obvious swelling of interest in this subject. Again, it's part of people trying to bring back health and wellness into their daily life. The slow-food movement clearly values the experience, the process, the flavor, and the simplicity. I'm hoping that that's also the experience someone would have listening to this record. Those are certainly the values I've put into it.

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