

FACT

INTERVIEW: BREADWOMAN RISES - THE MAKING OF A MODERN MYSTIC by MIKEY IQ JONES

Do you remember her singing to you, when you were a little one afraid of the dark?

"She is singing to you now. She will gather you up with the warm arms of her voice and hold you as quietly as sleep in the cave of her heart... She is listening now, the old one, the first and last of an ancient race. Almost all have forgotten her, buried deep within our common soil, speaking in the mother tongue, singing the root songs of formation and of nourishment." [From the liner notes to the original *Breadwoman* cassette, 1985]

Breadwoman was a multidisciplinary creation by Los Angeles performance artist and Anna Homler and composer Steve Moshier, who collaborated in 1985 on a privately dubbed and distributed cassette, now reissued by RVNG Intl. with additional material. A stunning document of modern mysticism and rhythmic synthesis, it has touchstones of familiarity for anyone interested in the underground sound art scenes that produced Laurie Anderson, Robert Ashley, Annea Lockwood, or Laurie Spiegel, but filters it all through a calming balm, balancing the pinging waves of Moshier's echolocational electronics with the soft vocal of a mysterious, matronly spectre singing lullabies to frightened children. Drawing on visual media, performance art, and sound recordings, Breadwoman stands out among the sound art of the era because of its malleability. Homler herself agrees: "A lot of the people I've worked with, and my reference points... there are remnants, but they're almost all gone now. It's like I'm an artifact from another world."



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Homler conceived of Breadwoman—or, as she'd prefer, "found" Breadwoman—when Los Angeles's creative community was a hotbed of cross-pollination between the art galleries, the punk scene, the DIY cabaret and drag shows, and the eccentric cabalistic practitioners. That LA has long since mutated and disappeared; much like New York City's art and music worlds, they're still there, but their DNA has changed almost beyond recognition. Homler has traveled through those changes with evolving muses, each one opening new doors.

"Every ten years, I'm given a big image. In the '80s, I was given Breadwoman as a character, as a companion on a journey. Before Breadwoman there was The Whale, my '61 Cadillac that became a performance vehicle. I was giving people Whale rides in my Cadillac, I fixed up the interior like an underwater shrine." It was in the belly of The Whale that Homler first found her singing voice, on a drive to California's Topanga Canyon in 1982 in the hope of working with the novelist, poet, and playwright Deena Metzger. Homler recorded herself singing wordless, rhythmic ululations on cassette as she drove, unintentionally documenting not only her journey to Metzger, but to Breadwoman.

"There was a rich and lively art scene in downtown LA in the 1980s, and there was a lot of interdisciplinary crossover, a co-mingling of talents, especially in the contemporary composition and modern dance worlds," Homler remembers. She first heard Steve Moshier, a composer, percussionist, and synthesist, performing in a group called the Cartesian Reunion Memorial Orchestra during a collaboration with a dance company.

"I had never heard music like that before. It was beautiful, dissonant, minimal, composed. It really moved me. I loved his compositions. So I approached him and said I had these cassettes which I'd recorded in my car—because that's what you do. I'd drive and sing as I was driving, anytime I'd feel a chant coming on. I couldn't repeat these songs. I had no way of notating them — I'd tried, but it never made sense afterwards, so that's why I'd record them. I'd go back and listen to the tapes, and sometimes there'd be a chorus, or a phrase repeating, and that's how I'd name them and catalogue them. I'd go 'Oh, that's 'Ee Ché'."

The character of Breadwoman taps into this concept: she's a healer, a storyteller, a siren who beckons you to a place where you are unlikely to otherwise find yourself. "That's what I always believed during my initial performance art days in the early 1980s, predating Breadwoman," Homler continues. "I used to love to do performances in 'regular' places. A lot of my early performances were rituals. I did a performance called 'On The Egyptian Sleep Of Unopened Books'. I was working at Hunter's Books in Westwood, [California] and I was ready to leave my job, which was to pyramid the books on gift tables, and for my 'farewell ritual' I did a performance with a taped soundtrack, reading titles of books and using the sounds of book pages, telling the story of my life in the bookstore, and how people in ancient times would go to these temples of incubation where they'd have a healing dream.

"So I told my story, wrapped myself in a sheet, and went to sleep during store hours! I was there from six to ten, sleeping on the gift table wrapped in a sheet like a mummy, and I'd invited people to bring objects and put them on me. After a while, people forgot that I was there, and they'd just start reading the books on the table. I found performance art at that time to be very empowering. By 1982, I felt empowered enough to wear a loaf of bread on my head and go to the Westwood farmer's market in my bread head and just... be there. Just to see what would happen."

At that point, Homler wasn't yet singing publicly, but rather was "just a presence." The *Breadwoman* cassette was meant as both a document of Breadwoman's language and songbook, and a soundtrack to her public performances.

"I'd been vocalizing [in private] at that point, but I hadn't yet put the two together. It was like puzzle pieces—you have an image, you have a sound, you're playing around with both of them, and then you go, 'Oh! It's this!' And then it comes together. It was a big deal for me to take my bread head off and just sing. That was huge, because I didn't think of myself as a singer. In my brain it was separated, like different categories in an egg carton, each with its little place. I compartmentalize everything, so getting to that point where I felt comfortable was huge."

Aside from the songs and chants of Polynesia, Homler drew from other eclectic and unexpected sources. "The people who inspired me were singers from other cultures, women singers from Burundi, Bulgaria, gypsy chants, things like that. And Irene Papas, her album *Odes* [a 1979 collection of traditional Greek folk songs sung by Papas and arranged, performed, and produced by Vangelis], oh my god, so gorgeous! All of this music nourished me, and it was primarily the music of women. I also loved blues and R&B singers like Candi Staton, Ann Peebles, and Irma Thomas. I listened to a lot of that, music where you can hear the tissues of a woman's voice."

Amid the manifestation of Breadwoman came the establishment of Pharmacia Poetica, an ongoing, site-specific project inspired by the Renaissance philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Paracelsus. The former developed the philosophy of "platonic love," while the latter was a physician, astrologer, and botanist who pioneered toxicology and was an early observer of antisepsis. Ficino believed in the potential of the spiritual bond between two people, while Paracelsus was a champion of the natural world's healing powers. These overarching themes are the foundations of nearly all of Homler's work over the course of her career, Breadwoman included.

Raised in a family of teachers and pharmacists, Homler often discovered remnants of her family's trade histories in her aunt's garage, coming across apothecary bottles, clock parts, and assorted ephemera, which helped her visualize her concept of sound, poetry, language, and objects utilized in various configurations to create positive healing environments. Homler and Moshier's initial collaboration was a radio play for Californian sound artist and radio host Jacki Apple's Soundings show on KPFK; the same radio play was also the first manifestation of Homler's Pharmacia, which over the years has become her conceptual sanctuary and also her music publishing house.

Homler's work as a healer has included vocal workshops for adults and a children's workshop she calls the Sound Kitchen, which highlights the musical properties of everyday objects through simple vocal exercises, participatory and improvised songforms, and a heightened awareness of the performer's environment. Homler encourages participants to "find an ocean full of creatures in your breath, find an orchestra in your kitchen. There are certain kitchen implements which sound incredible—potato slicers can sound like angelic harps. Egg timers, wooden spoons. My own sound table consists of objects that people give me or things that I find in the street. Right now I'm into bird whistles. The world is full of objects that make beautiful sounds, so I'm just trying to help open that arena for [the children who attend]."

"With the vocal workshops, you won't leave being able to sing opera, but hopefully you'll come out relaxed and with a good feeling about yourself, more in tune with your body. That's what the vocal workshops are all about—using sound to explore our inner selves. The Sound Kitchen is more taking things of the outer world and exploring them. I'm not actually teaching technique, it's more an exploration. There's no pedagogy."

As an improviser and in the Sound Kitchen workshops, Homler makes use of household and kitchen objects, toys and "nonmusical" allsorts to emphasize the rich emotional power of these small statements, and it's the same with Breadwoman's songs, which strip away the baggage of coded verbal language to leave only unfiltered emotive ululations.

Asked how she attempts to define her multidisciplinary body of work, or if she considers herself a composer, a storyteller, or a singer, she describes herself as "a melodic improviser". "I'm textural, just like Breadwoman. I'm an ensemble player more than a frontwoman. I see myself more easily in the context of a group, and duos and trios are my favorite. I don't do solo work anymore, but when I was [performing solo], I was a storyteller. I don't have the luxury of time to grow as a solo performer any longer. I don't think that anyone really does anymore. I really miss that."

Homler first connected with Matt Werth of RVNG Intl. through New York City sound artist, composer and collagist Gen-Ken Montgomery, who in 2013 completed an art installation where he recreated Generator, his East Village shop and performance space from the 1980s. Werth attended the installation where, says Homler, he was handed the Breadwoman material by Montgomery. "Then I got an email from Matt one day," she says. "I didn't know who he was, he was just saying, 'I'm a fan, I just heard Breadwoman, I really love it!' Then in his next email he told me about his label and asked me, 'Would you like to bring Breadwoman to a wider audience?' And it took a long time—it took me a long time, really."

Asked if she feels it is easier now for people to understand what Breadwoman represents, she recalls something Moshier once remarked to her. "Steve said, 'People are hungering for something authentic.' This might be a time—because everything is so digitized and fragmented, it's so different than the '80s—that people actually appreciate something authentic. They might not recognize it, but when they experience something authentic, I think they're relieved."

In an era of digital cynicism and viral "brand" marketing, this is refreshing to hear. Last year a young woman going by Bread Face caused a brief social media sensation with a series of Instagram videos showing her pressing her face into loaves of bread, sparking confusion, curiosity, and criticism across the ether. Discovering these videos, Homler and Breadwoman immediately sprang to mind, though Bread Face doesn't sing, or "perform" as such; she simply smooshes her face into dough to the sounds of Whitney Houston and Rihanna. Before I can ask Homler's thoughts on the viral sensation, she beats me to the punch in a flurry of laughter.

"I love it! I can't speak for her, but I had an overwhelming desire to wear bread. I didn't want to smash my face in it, I just wanted to stick my head in a loaf. I mean, if you've ever hollowed out a loaf of bread, it's so soft, and yielding, and sensual... and then, a few days later, it's rigid and hard. But I was fascinated by this woman, because I wanted to know what this woman wanted from the bread, and if she wanted to wear it the way that I did. I was going, 'Oh, look at her, she's doing the same thing,' but she's actually not!"

When Homler re-emerged as Breadwoman a few years ago, she received an altogether more receptive reaction, despite any confusion her performances may still elicit, thirty years after she first wandered through the Westwood farmers' market in her robes and bread mask. The last Breadwoman performance before her current tour with Steven Warwick, also known as PAN artist Heatsick, was in November 2011 in the window of Antebellum, "a beautiful [place] that's a cross between a fetish gallery and a tea shop." The performance manifested as an installation outside a cabaret night, created in collaboration with visual artists Elaine Parks and Helen Van der Neer.

"I'd wanted to perform as [myself], but the booking agent wanted Breadwoman. He actually wanted a [black-attired] Breadwoman for Day Of The Dead, which is really big in Los Angeles, so I sat in the window and performed as a different version of Breadwoman than I had ever been. Elaine made this beautiful mask which was very ornate and ancient-looking, and was so heavy that it had to be suspended from the ceiling, so I kind of put myself into the mask and sat behind it. It was really interesting for me, because I was Breadwoman, but for the first time I wasn't the Breadwoman that I knew. [This version] was more abstract, more elegant, ancient and metaphysical.

"I never knew what Breadwoman looked like [in the '80s] until I was downtown, and I saw this homeless woman wearing a huge wrap around her head, covering her face, wearing heavy layers of cloth. But this [new] Breadwoman was different. I missed my cuddly, weird elephant woman. She had been 'sleeping'—my father had died, and I spent a couple of years doing stuff around that. Then I started singing as me, working in Europe with different improvisers, which all led to more collaborations and projects, like a big connect-the-dots puzzle. Breadwoman is the

foundation, and everything else came from that. It was discovering this musical language, and trusting it, then everything else followed. These performances with Steven [Warwick] will be interesting for me because it's the first time in thirty years that I'll get to see and experience Breadwoman the way everyone else does—because I'm singing live, so I can't wear the mask. It doesn't have a mouth. I don't think that I could wear it anymore, it's time for someone else to wear it. She needs a new body, to have new experiences."

Homler, Warwick, and Breadwoman are touring the UK and Europe in the coming weeks, with further adventures in the USA to follow in the spring. Alongside this, Homler continues to record and perform as an improviser in various group projects, including a duo with Sylvia Hallett called Bread And Shed, as well as trios with Tania Chen + Gino Robair, and Winkhaus (London improvisers Dave Tucker and Adrian Northover). She also has finished another album as Voices Of Kwahn with UK ambient dub techno producer Mark "Pylon King" Davies.

As for what the future holds for Breadwoman, Homler is reassuring. "Breadwoman was always there, sweetie, whether I was wearing a loaf of bread on my head or not. I *am* Breadwoman, but after a while I just got to be a vocalist. I had to be Breadwoman to allow myself permission to sing, to find my voice. After I found my voice, I didn't need to wear bread anymore."

