

In 1982, performance artist Anna Homler put a loaf of bread on her face and became Breadwoman, a character who sang and chanted in an amalgamation of languages and sounds.

Although Homler eventually retired the guise, she continues to create music centered around chants and improvised language, and use everyday objects as instruments. In a new documentary, *Breadwoman Tales & Trails*, directed by Hazel Hill McCarthy III and Douglas J. McCarthy, Homler revisits her time as Breadwoman. New York-based record label RVNG Intl is reissuing her recordings from the period. Lucky Peach spoke with her about the project.



Can you talk about the compulsion to wear bread on your head? Can you explain where that came from?

It was just really an inkling, do you know what I mean? I know today there's a woman who smashes her face into bread. I don't know if it's the same thing that moves her but, for me, at the time, I was just starting to do performance art and writing, and I was getting trained to notice the things I was attracted to. The things that I was feeling and seeing from the corner of my eye. It wasn't like, "Oh my God, I have to wear bread," but it was more like this feeling, I wonder what it would be like to wear bread. And it was a very sensual experience to hollow it out.

My early performance artwork was about food. Before I was Breadwoman, I did a performance where I did kind of a dance in beautiful cakes. It was called *Cakewalk*. It was in a place called LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) for a membership benefit in 1982. I wheeled out a metro cart that had the most beautiful cakes. I put them on the floor, and I did a little Mexican hat dance around the cakes, and I ended up stepping in them all. Smashing them.

My performance art was always about food. Other people do very political work. I wasn't so much drawn to politics as I was drawn to food. Food as a medium, as kind of a magical thing that's in daily life. Because all my work is really about finding the unusual qualities of everyday things.

Now I'm a singer, and I play objects that normally you wouldn't think of as art or instruments. I have a potato slicer that sounds like a small metallic harp. And I know egg slicers can sound very beautiful. Tonight at dinner I found this wonderful little serving bowl, and I can play it for you over the phone. It might not sound so wonderful to you, but to me it's very thrilling. It's like a bell! So that's what I mean. I'm interested in transformations.

Can you talk more about how you made the masks?

At first I used to use real bread. I lived near a boulangerie, and to me the bread always looked like faces, like heads. There's even a really beautiful poem by the poet W.S. Merwin, and it's called "Bread." He starts off, "Each face in the street is a slice of bread." But also the bread, anyway, reminded me of faces and heads. And because there were many, many kinds of bread at this particular French market, and they all looked like faces, I thought it was going to be a really easy thing to do, just to hollow the bread out, because it was the same size as my face.

But once when I was doing a performance, they didn't have my size bread. I had to wear this huge pumpernickel loaf. It sounds funny, but it wasn't the right feeling for Breadwoman. So I decided I had better have a mask made that looked like bread. I thought, I better standardize it, I better have the right loaf. So I worked with a woman named Robin Wrightcheck-Martin. She was a costumer, and she made a costume for me that tied in the mask and the costume. So Breadwoman looked like a peasant, like a grandmother peasant. I imagined Breadwoman as a woman who lived in the center of the earth, who was so old that her face had turned into bread. She gathered the root sounds of all languages and sang songs. And that's how I connected it to the music.

I'm interested in what it actually physically feels like to wear bread.

Oh, it's really soft and nice! That's what I remember. I haven't worn bread for thirty years. And I just love how bread looks, because I do see that connection between flesh and bread. And then it becomes very hard, and it's like a stone.

I'm in Germany, which is the land of the brotchen. Germany really is the land of bread. Because they have all different styles of these little breakfast breads. I'm from LA, so what we have are muffins and bagels. If you're lucky, a croissant. But in Germany there are these little breads that are so adorable, and they look like stones!

Do you think you were so drawn to the bread because you needed it in some way at that time? That bread is what you were hungry for?

I think I was hungry for a metaphor. Aristotle said that the soul needs images—and I think I was hungry for a metaphor, for an image. Not an image like we use it today, like for PR or anything like that. But a symbolic image. Something that had depth. Something that had meaning. Something that was ancient. Something that was universal. And I think I found that in bread.

3. CHILDHOOD

You were saying that you find similarities between bread and skin. Does it influence you in any way to find all these similarities and also to hear that your language sounds like African?

Anna: It's not really a very intellectual process. It's spontaneous more than intellectual. I wish I could say more, but you know... Breadwoman came to me. She came slowly and then afterwards I did the research. The image came, the feelings came and the songs came. This happens over time, not like a crash course, six weeks. This is a lot of work.

How would you describe your childhood?

Anna: My childhood? A nightmare! (laughs) Which is why I'm having my childhood now.

Can you tell us a little about the music you listened to in your childhood and teenage years? Is there anything that marked you creatively during those years?

Anna: When I was a child, I listened to show tunes.... the music of Rogers and Hammerstein, for instance. My parents had LPs from all the musicals.... South Pacific, Carousel, The King and I were the ones I remember. My friends and I would make up stories and dance to the music. In my teenage years I listened to Motown and Blues...primarily female singers...but the men were BB King, Otis Redding, The Miracles, Sam and Dave and Howard Tate. I loved the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, Irma Frankin, Ann Peebles, Memphis Minnie, Carla Thomas, Mary Wells, Lorraine Ellison, Fontella Bass and Candy Staton. I also liked the Marvellettes, another Motown group. There were a lot of girl groups at that time, too. After I saw Fellini's Juliet of the Spirits, I became fascinated by the film music of Nina Rota. I also liked the music and instruments of Harry Partch and Noh Theater.



When I was in graduate school, I lived in Cambridge, Mass., near the Coop record store and found a lot of amazing albums. I loved strange instrumentals, music box sounds, toy piano, world, as well as classical music. I was never a big straight pop music person, but liked and still like, mysterious, evocative and somewhat unusual music. I still tend to listen to the same recordings over and over and over again.

How do you relate to the younger generation?

Anna: I'm just starting to. I try to ignore everything. (laughs) Have you ever seen those Victorian chairs that look like elephant ears? That's where I was and now I'm meeting a lot of younger people and I really connect with them. But for years I was sort of in a bubble. My father was dying and I was taking care of him and that was a whole parallel universe. I had to stop making music and just focus on that.

4. CATEGORIES

What is your view on the scarcity of women musicians, performers or DJs?

Anna: Sitting next to Matt is the closest I've ever come to the music industry. Earlier, Matt said "I'm a businessman".

Matt: No, I said that some people perceive me as a businessman. I don't think I am. I don't know what I am.

Anna: I think you are. But that's another discussion. Matt is amazing and he is so much that I don't know where to put him in my brain. So it's interesting for me. I've always been an outsider. I haven't been commercial. There was never a category for my music, except for maybe experimental, you know? Maybe weird woman vocalist. One day in Amsterdam, I got two rejection letters from VPRO programmers. One letter said I was too avant-garde and the other said I wasn't avant-garde enough. I was young and maybe naïve and the world was different and I thought, 'oh I'm singing this language, I will just go around, get it in record stores; and people were unbelievably open. So I went with a suitcase of Breadwoman cassettes and I went to Europe, to Amsterdam. I couldn't find the underground. What I found was people saying that 'performance art is dead. Go back to California. Oh, you're not from New York? Who do you know that we know?' And I didn't know the right people, I wasn't from NY, I was from LA. I wasn't on this map; I didn't exist in this map at all."

I had one friend in radio and happened to meet an English promoter on the show and I ended up in London recording - kind of - house music with Voices of Kwahn. And then it was like connect the dots. The Pylon King (his real name is Mark Davies) had a publishing deal and had a lot of recording gear. We recorded in his bedsit, and the next thing I knew we had a dance LP, Three Whale Trip. It was this crazy thing; that was my hit. That was my commercial moment, because we got big royalties, a label in Ibiza put us on a compilation album. And the music was really ahead of its time, at that time, early '90s. I didn't realize it was happening. You just go to the next thing, and the next thing and whatever it is, you are not thinking what's going to happen.

And to answer your question, I don't think I see any scarcity of woman in music. Actually I do and I don't. It depends where you are looking. The London improvised music scene has many strong women players. Brussels, too.

5. A NEED TO CREATE

You were saying earlier that people started to become interested in Breadwoman.

Anna: Because of Matt.

But do you think they were interested in the concept or in the music itself?

Anna: I don't know, what do you think?

Or both? Or neither?

Anna: I think both.

There's this mysterious character and the music and the instrumentation, which is really like ahead of its time sonically, and also the voices and the language, which you say doesn't exist in any semantic form.

Anna: Oh, it does exist. I'm sure it exists. It's an idiolect. If only one person speaks a language it's an idiolect and it's a dialect when a group of people speaks it. Yoko Ono said that "two people create a reality". If you have agreement, then you have a reality. You just need one other person.

What does Breadwoman mean as a character?

Anna: I can imagine her jumping off the page. I mean, this time around I can imagine Breadwoman in outer space. I'd see Breadwoman talking to the stars. A friend of mine drew this for me, these breads in space.

Matt: It's like Beats In Space; the bakery side.

Anna: Matt heard me say this a thousand times, but if you look closely at bread, you can see a Moon. You can see a planet. If you dig a hole into bread you can see a Universe. It has the macro and the micro. So I imagine her as a character and she will have a new life now. I don't know what, but I imagine she could. I'm still digesting seeing Natsuko dancing, you know?

What would you say is the driving force behind materializing all these ideas and manifestations of Breadwoman?

Anna: I think creative intelligence that underlies everything. Does this sound too general? It's just a need to create. You need to create.

It's coming from within?

Anna: Yeah. Like a plant. You don't ask the plant "what are you doing?" A plant doesn't have an appointment book. It's just growing. I believe in things evolving.

So are you thinking of these ideas or do they come out spontaneously? What's the creative process?

Anna: Lately, since Breadwoman, I've been working with improvisers. So it's totally in the moment. I can think of an idea like 'oh I'd like to do a CD with duets with people', but in the moment it's just working with people. I love improvising and that's what I mostly do and what I have done since Breadwoman. I also have a pharmacy. If you go on my website you can find Pharmacia Poetica. For over twenty years I've had a pharmacy where I bottled things. It's about the shift from literal to the poetic. The Pharmacia Poetica takes very ordinary things and shows how marvelous and beautiful they are.

6. TO BREATHE

Do you ever wonder about how the things you are doing and creating are going to be perceived? Is there an outcome you're trying to get to?

Anna: I don't know. I have been focused on the logistics of this tour.

Is there a certain type of audience you'd like to reach?

Anna: No, I don't. I don't have a picture for it. Probably young artistic types if I had to choose. Creative people.

How does a normal day look for you?

Anna: There is no normal day.

What's your routine then?

Anna: I have a micro routine, but I can't really say what it is.

Is it a realistic thing to have high expectations from your work?

Anna: I don't think I do anymore. I think I've changed. I think about things differently now. If I can just do my work and have the means to do my work and have an audience, I'm really happy. I don't need to be Laurie Anderson, but if I can just do my work and travel to play in Europe, what can be better? That's my goal; to continue. For an artist it's enough to survive, that's already a lot, it's a huge thing.

Do you think an artist should be separated from his work?

Anna: Sometimes people who do great work are actually not very easy to be around. Artists who do great work have to be focused and intense focus can feel like selfishness to other people.

But over the years they would be remembered for their work.

Anna: Yes, not because they were jerks. (laughs) It's like a sea shell, the animal dies but the shell remains.

Could you tell us if you got any good advice from musicians that you admire or you follow?

Anna: To breathe. That's the best advice I've ever got.

