



Arts

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Waking Life

Taking a break from his band Joe, Marc's Brother, Joe Pisapia holes up at home to make the stunning *Daydreams*

By Heather Johnson

Joe Pisapia

Daydreams (self-released)

Available at Grimey's and other local record stores

Pisapia plays July 13 at the Belcourt Theatre

Joe Pisapia has been awake for a total of five minutes as he sits at his kitchen table to talk about his solo debut, fittingly titled *Daydreams*. "It's the kind of record you put on when you're writing, or when you're going to bed or waking up," the singer-guitarist-songwriter explains as he pours a cup of coffee and rakes his fingers through a head of corkscrew curls gone wild.

Pisapia's latest work shares some of the characteristics of the French roast he's drinking—organic and warm, with a distinct character. A departure from the complex power pop he performs as frontman for local group Joe, Marc's Brother, *Daydreams* ponders the beauty of keeping life and music simple.

After bringing home a 1924 Gibson acoustic archtop guitar, the New Jersey native began composing songs as a creative exercise, writing for personal pleasure rather than for the band. "I just got into it. Then I had all these songs that I didn't think were any good, because they didn't sound like the band," Pisapia says modestly. "One day I played my brother [drummer Marc Pisapia] the songs and he loved them. I just didn't know what to do with them."

Deciding his stream-of-consciousness experiment would make an interesting solo album, he found a way to engineer his own work, hibernating in his Belmont Boulevard apartment with a living room full of instruments and a bedroom full of recording equipment. "Jim DeMain [who also mastered the album] loaned me a bunch of gear, and I picked the brains of all my

engineer and producer friends when I would run into trouble," Pisapia says of his learn-as-you-go recording process. "I had done recordings in my house before, but this one was so organic, it was like trying to learn classic photography when all you have is a digital camera."

Pisapia played most of the instruments himself, while his iMac-powered Cubase music production software captured every sound—for better or worse. "Every now and then, somebody would drop a shoe upstairs, and I'd have to do [a part] over. Or I'd forget to turn the phone off," he recalls.

Certain unintentional sound effects were omitted from the mix, while other noises, such as the sounds of brushing teeth and running water on "Home," were placed there on purpose. Throughout the disc, Pisapia combines traditional instruments with current technology, mixing the vintage Gibson acoustic with keyboard-generated strings, combining a dusty old banjo with a drum machine. Despite the various combinations of stringed and electronic implements, Pisapia's primary instrument—the electric guitar—never made it onto the recording.

Pisapia also let go of his usual esoteric lyrical style, choosing instead to communicate with ingenuous, straightforward wisdom and honesty. Words seem to bypass the intellect altogether, taking a path that begins at the heart and ends as a full-fledged song. In the liner notes to *Daydreams*, Pisapia writes, "I wanted to err on the side of feeling over thinking."

The most direct verses can be heard on "That's Enough," a heartwarming anthem of gratitude featuring New Yorker Don Piper on guitar, brother Marc on drums and Liz Hodder on background vocals. "I've got a daytime / And I've got a nighttime / And that's enough," he sings quietly. Reflecting on the camping trip that inspired the song, Pisapia says, "I had these moments last summer where I realized I have a great life. I don't really need that much stuff. Those moments don't really stay, unfortunately...but they're what life is all about."

On the ethereal title track, a 45-second prelude that could serve as background music to a lucid dream, a faint soprano voice invites us to "fly away," while a staccato guitar line floats underneath. In the sparse, acoustic "Empty," Pisapia quickly nudges us back into the waking state as he ponders the need to have all the answers: "He searches the left brain for something to say / He searches the right brain / But he can't find the words in either place." Chris Carmichael's mournful string arrangement and a simple guitar melody intensify the feelings of isolation and desperation. But for the person suffering from this emptiness, Pisapia offers sage advice: "If you find yourself empty / At a loss for words / Be thankful you're living a life that's free and clear and unrehearsed."

The mood brightens, at least melodically, on "Sometimes," an upbeat blend of old-time country and 1960s psychedelia conjured by Pisapia's clunky banjo and sci-fi organ, Jeff Finlin's steady snare drum and Jennie Okon's subtle background harmonies. Lyrically, the song expresses the anxiety of a suffocating relationship, with Pisapia pleading for a needy lover to "let go of my heart."

"Tell Me You're Mine," a powerful love song featuring piano, electronic and live percussion, and sporadic harmonica and banjo, is the only song that has carried over to the Joe, Marc's Brother repertoire. The 10-year-old trio, comprised of the two siblings and bassist James "Hags" Haggerty, performed a rocked-out version of "Tell Me You're Mine" at 12th & Porter last April, their first show since the three musicians decided to explore outside interests.

Earlier this winter and spring, Pisapia spent time fine-tuning his solo material in Nashville, New York and Europe (where he opened for Americana singer-songwriter Kevin Montgomery), while his bandmates spent a solid two months touring the U.S. with singer-songwriter Josh Rouse. Although Pisapia's solo work has been his primary focus as of late, the expressive guitarist-vocalist believes the group's hiatus has reignited their passion for making music together. "For years [Marc and I] had our lives scheduled around Joe, Marc's Brother," Pisapia says. "We're brothers—who can get on each other's nerves more than any two people. We grew up together and we still love each other like best friends. So it's like we've won it all. No amount of success can replace that."

The break also gave Pisapia time to develop his talents as a producer, teaming up with folk singer-songwriter Liz Hodder, roots-rock philosopher Bob Bradley and lush pop duo The Pierces (for whom he served as co-producer with Roger Moutenot).

As *Daydreams* slowly evolved from a creative exercise into a full-length CD, Pisapia says that friends, fans and fellow musicians consistently remarked on the personal nature of the work. "I tried to make it really honest—like the thoughts I was having—and not try to cloud them up too much," he says. "It has to do with channeling beauty into the mundane.... It's a crazy thing, this human thing, but it is what it is."

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