

The Inner Process of Clarification

In his upcoming album, REDEMPTION, Thomas Graf tells the story of a relationship—from beginning to end.

Text: Frank “Otti” von Düren

Foto: Sabine Gassner

Our last interview was a good year and a half ago; back then, we talked about your album “Brave.” How have things been for you since then?

“Brave” was a milestone for me. For one thing, it was the first time I used drums and bass guitar, creating a full band sound—the albums before that had been recorded acoustically. On the other hand, it was my first time getting airplay on the radio, since “Brave” was named Album of the Week on SR2-Kulturradio and received a nearly 5-minute album review. That was really great. After that, I performed a lot as a solo artist—in the Munich area, but also in Vienna and the Stuttgart area—and then gradually recorded the songs for my new album, “Redemption.”

What experiences have been particularly important to you as a musician in the meantime?

One thing that was definitely important to me was the recognition “Brave” received as Album of the Week on SR2-Kulturradio. That’s not something to be taken for granted, and given all the creativity and work I put into the album, it was really wonderful. Also, starting this year, I’ve been performing solo instead of as a duo, which gives me more freedom during concerts—because I don’t have to stick to a fixed schedule, I can play the songs differently than last time, and I can even change the setlist on the fly. And then the creative process behind the new album “Redemption” was also very special for me—we’ll definitely talk more about that later.

Now you’ve finished a brand-new album called “Redemption.” What was your main source of inspiration for it?

Most of the ten songs were written a few years ago, when I began to realize how and why romantic relationships—whether mine or those of people around me—often fail. How you’re initially drawn to each other, but then you’re confronted with your own issues, which come to the surface when you’re with your partner—perhaps so they can be worked through or healed.

And those issues then lead to the relationship's failure if you don't honestly face your own issues, perhaps even with professional help. "Redemption" here refers to the inner process of coming to terms with the failure of a relationship—when you no longer blame the other person, when you take responsibility for your own behavior, when you reach a point of reconciliation, and ultimately try to grow as a person.

How would you summarize the development of the album, from the initial idea to the final product?

It all started with the songs—as they were written one after another, they gradually evolved into a concept album, coming together as the musical expression of an idea that connects all the songs. Then came the recording phase and the creative process of arranging the instruments and shaping the songs. After that, the first ideas emerged for how the album could be designed graphically—the cover was set from the very beginning, but the images on the back and inside the album came together gradually. Then came the idea to release five songs as singles in advance, before the album as a whole came out. For each of the five singles, I needed a cover that would express the song's concept and align with the look and feel of the album cover. Ultimately, I decided to create individual covers for each of the ten songs and include them in the booklet alongside the respective lyrics. And finally, the idea came up to shoot a video for the first single, "The Last Shot."

"Redemption" tells a love story from beginning to end, with all its ups and downs—so it's a classic concept album. How did you go about translating each stage of the story into music that fits?

Actually, I hadn't set out to write a concept album. Instead, the songs simply emerged during the respective phases of my life when the relevant theme was at the forefront: the feeling of being in love, for example, before a relationship began; despair and feelings of guilt during the relationship; or self-reflection and reconciliation when looking back. Little by little, the idea arose to compile all of this into an album where the individual songs follow the linear development of a relationship between two people.

You also worked with very different instrumentation depending on the song, using larger and smaller ensembles accordingly. What was the thinking behind that?

For me, the character of the song—how I feel it—is always the deciding factor. With "New Year's Eve" or "Bitter End," it was clear from the start that they would be rock songs and would require an arrangement to match. For sad songs like "Better Man," on the other hand, I wanted a soft accordion, a mellow flugelhorn, and gentle drums. And with songs like "The Last Shot" or "Guilt," despite the serious lyrics, I sense a rather light and danceable country vibe.

“Unsre Zeit” is the only German-language track in an otherwise entirely English-language album. How did this contrast come about?

That, too, arose from the situation. The plan wasn’t to write a German song for a new album. “Unsre Zeit” just came about in the moment, just as I’ve often written German songs before. It simply had to be on the album because many of the songs from “Redemption” were written during that same period.

Which song presented the biggest challenge for you when it came to putting the right feeling into the music?

I’d say “Hidden Helpers.” Because with that one, I was really unsure about exactly how it should be arranged for the album. It’s one thing to compose and play the song on the guitar—but then it’s another to produce it for an album so that it captures the mood and also fits the album’s narrative flow. In fact, I still think “old school” in terms of old vinyl LP concepts, where the order of the songs is important, where there’s an A-side and a B-side, and where the first and last songs on each side are especially important.

On the other hand, which song came most easily to you?

The songs that came most easily to me—in terms of composition and concept—were “Separate Paths,” “Unsre Zeit,” and “The Last Shot.” And that went for the recording as well, because I quickly knew exactly how the songs should sound.

The booklet features an image for each song, which also serves as the cover art for the singles. Why was this visual presentation important to you, and how did you approach it?

The idea came to me when I decided to release five singles. After all, I needed a separate cover for each one. So for “The Last Shot,” I thought about which image might fit the song’s content well. Once I’d settled on the idea for the single cover—in this case, the Joshua Tree landscape with Colt in the holster—I scoured image databases and then designed everything in a graphics program. And that’s how I did it for the other four singles as well. At some point, I liked the idea of using the images in the booklet as well—the lyrics of a song on the left and the corresponding image on the right. So I designed images for the remaining five songs, and now there are ten images and an album cover.

Since the album tells a cohesive story, will you perform it all in one go at upcoming concerts?

I don’t plan to do that so far. I like to play the songs separately, combined with tracks from my other albums, and I also enjoy telling the story behind each song—but not all ten “Redemption” songs in a row.

When you look back now at the “Redemption” series as a whole, what do you see as the essence of that part of your life?

That part of my life is already a few years behind me now. But I can say it was an important phase of my life during which I learned a lot that I put into practice today. Recognizing when you're behaving in a self-destructive way; learning to take responsibility for your actions, being honest with yourself, and also facing uncomfortable feelings or talking about them with others—instead of pushing them aside or avoiding contact.

And aside from the release of the album and the accompanying singles, what are your plans for the near future?

Actually, right now I'm really looking forward to the release of "Redemption" and what I hope will be a great response to it. Just like with "Brave," there will be a release party to celebrate it properly. Then I have some great concerts coming up, including my first one in Freiburg. And after that, it's only a matter of time before I dive back into some kind of creative process—whether it's writing new songs, putting together a band, or something completely new.