

IN A SILENT WAY

a film by Gwenaël Breës



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IN A SILENT WAY

a film by Gwenaël Breës

duration 88'

all the promotional material is uploadable on www.derives.be



<http://facebook.com/inasilentwayfilm/>

SYNOPSIS

A film crew crisscrosses England trying to unravel the mystery surrounding a record released 30 years earlier, « Spirit of Eden », that defined the passage from light to shadow of its makers, the band *Talk Talk* and its lead singer Mark Hollis. From overwhelming obstacles to unpredictable encounters, their journey soon turns into an organic quest. With silence as a horizon line. And punk as a philosophy, thinking that music is accessible to all and that the human spirit is above the technique.



« Silence is the most powerful instrument I have. Spirit is everything, and technique is always secondary. »

Mark Hollis, Talk Talk

INTERVIEW WITH GWENAËL BREËS

How did you come up with this documentary about Mark Hollis and the world of Talk Talk?

When «Spirit of Eden» was released, it was the 80's, a period I hated, especially on a musical level. I was 14 years old and I was overwhelmed by that music. It really fueled my imagination and as a result, I became much more eclectic, I started to take an interest in a lot of musical genres I didn't know about. And then I was intrigued by the metamorphosis of that band from synth-pop to organic music, from stardom to some kind of secrecy. I think that's a very healthy attitude towards the world of show business, but it's also very unusual. It always stayed in the back of my mind. Then came «Laughing Stock», their last record, and Mark Hollis' solo album, which blew me away even more. And then, silence. In 2006, I came across an article in the British press about the creative process of those three records. I was amazed by the intensity, the integrity, the thoroughness, even in the way they turned the page and disappeared... The idea of a film made its way into my mind, instinctively. But once I realized how heavy it was to produce a film, I gave it up. I turned it into a radio project, then into a book... and finally it became a film anyway.

It seems that the deeper you dig into Mark Hollis, the more the mystery lingers and even thickens. Were you hoping to find answers by making a film?

There was a part of me that just acted like a fan, even though I don't really like that word. And it's a paradox: I'm captivated by that fascinating music, and yet I'm obsessed with unravelling its mysteries; I have a great admiration for a man who's chosen to disappear and keep quiet, and I'm driven by the idea of finding him and getting him to talk... No doubt this is what any fan tends to think: «Okay, he has chosen to withdraw, but still, with me, the meeting might happen!»



On the other hand, the absence of Mark Hollis also contributes to the beauty of the film. His absence is paradoxically there all along, it drives the film. Was it somehow deliberate or is it a result of the circumstances?

I first tried to understand the motives behind his withdrawal. It was someone who didn't want to look back on the past, who had the strength to make real breaks in his life, and who didn't want to intellectualise the music. He often argued that anything he could say about his music or his lyrics would only spoil them. And then, he had obviously moved on to something else... But since I didn't belong to the music industry which he had turned his back on, and since my intention was to evoke freedom rather than to explain his music, I still had hopes of finding a meeting ground with him. It was highly hypothetical, but I had to give it a try anyway. The film eventually grew out of this absence, which is also a rather strong presence.

Hence the title of the movie, « In a Silent Way »?

It's not a silent film at all, but it does intersect several notions of silence. Silence in the music, the space between the notes, and the purification that Mark Hollis went towards. Media silence, namely that of disappearing from the public scene. And then the calm we lack in this world where we are constantly bombarded with noise and information, and we cannot choose what we hear. But the title is also a nod to one of Miles Davis' most experimental albums, whose influence hovers over Talk Talk.

You're talking about disappearance, and it's also a film about a world that has disappeared (e.g. recording studios) or is about to disappear.

In 1988, when Talk Talk decided to use recording equipment from the 1960s and to discard all synthesizers, as a response to the computerization of music, they were themselves already part of a bygone era. This is one of the reasons why they succeeded in creating timeless music, well beyond fashions. But I find it difficult to pin down the topic of the film in just a few words. First and foremost, it's a portrait in absence. But it's quite open, I think. It also deals with stardom, radicalism, the frictions between creation and production, and how to talk about a work of art...



One thing about your personal background is that you are self-taught. That goes for the members of Talk Talk as well when it comes to designing their music, since the instruments they've worked with are rarely used in rock or pop and they've used them in their albums in a DIY fashion, far from any technical virtuosity.

As a young listener of their music, it's a quality I was not aware of, I only understood it later. Mark Hollis wasn't a musician, he first took to the stage with the punk movement. Talk Talk's last two albums may sound rather sophisticated, but they stemmed from a pursuit of spontaneity: Mark Hollis and Tim Friese-Green spent months and months bringing musicians into the studio, letting them play as freely as possible, with virtually no guidelines. They started experimenting with instruments they had never played with before. That was their attitude: anyone can play music. Such a philosophy applies to a lot of other matters in life.

The fact that Mark Hollis came from the punk scene is quite significant. His music may be light years away from punk, yet something in his approach and creative process comes close to it.

The band is better known for its pop period, but that was actually the result of a misunderstanding, a deliberate formatting by the record company. The film says almost nothing about that period, it focuses mainly on the before and after. It was important for me to root their career in the late seventies' punk, rather than in the early eighties' synth-pop. Back then, Mark Hollis played in a garage rock band. He was immersed in his older brother's record collection, listening to music as varied as Miles Davis & Gil Evans, Sun Ra, Delius, psychedelic rock... but it was punk's energy and spirit that carried him through.

Mark Hollis never quite identified with the New Romantic Pop movement. He did everything he could to extricate himself from that success story, through a rather unique and radical artistic approach. Yet, while your project intended to show this, the process came under an almost unexpected constraint: Mark Hollis wanted to stop you from going through with your film...

Knowing that the members of Talk Talk hadn't given interviews for years, I chose to turn to more distant protagonists first, and then perhaps I would be

introduced to them more naturally. But from the outset, most of the people I approached asked me who had agreed or not to be interviewed, as if one person's agreement or refusal would determine the others' response. In the end, a few agreed. There was no budget for the film at that stage, but we immediately set up the first shoot: if we didn't do it right away, I was afraid that the few open doors would close.

I wasn't aware of it, but Mark Hollis had actually gotten wind of my project. One day, I received a letter from a London attorney who acted on behalf of Mark Hollis, warning me that I would not be allowed to use his music in the film under any circumstances, and asking me to drop the project. At that point, I understood the reason why there had never been a film about Talk Talk. I later learned that several filmmakers had actually had projects, but had dropped them after coming up against that kind of response.

So I decided to write to Mark Hollis personally, to tell him about my approach, how important his music was in my life, that this project was my own initiative and not a commission, that it wouldn't be a biopic or a TV report... I made him a fairly open proposal: he could contribute to the film in whatever way he wanted, not necessarily by appearing in the picture or answering questions. I even offered him a right to oversee the editing... He replied a few days later. He seemed touched by my letter, but confirmed that he didn't want the film to be made, because he wanted his music to simply keep «existing on its own».

For someone who had spent 20 years trying to get out of the media spotlight, your approach would have put him back into the game. And despite that, you decided to keep going. Isn't this film basically a sort of cinematic object derived from the universe of Talk Talk and Mark Hollis?

I thought a lot about what he had written to me, wondering whether it was morally right to continue. I didn't want to put myself at odds with him, to become his pet peeve! But I didn't quite understand his attitude: the history of Talk Talk is written in articles and in a book, he himself never objected to the re-release of his records, nor to the covers of some songs by other musicians or to their use in films... Why should he be against a documen-

tary? I learned that he was a film lover. Perhaps he had an acute awareness of the power of the image, and he was afraid that a film could interpret and spoil his music more than just words?

But I thought that when a work of art is finished, it lives its own life and also belongs to its audience. This music is an intimate part of my life, a source of inspiration. It seemed to me that there was room for a film that respected Mark Hollis' wishes. Less a documentary «about» than «in the footsteps» of a band, a film in which I would revolve around them in my own quest (a quest full of contradictions)... Besides, I would no longer risk spoiling their music, since I couldn't use it at all! Ironically, this restriction relieved me of an unsolvable question: how to use music on the screen, and what right do I have to chop it down to pieces and lay images on top of it?...

So I finally decided to go ahead, keeping in mind that I would reply to Mark Hollis later, once I had images to send him. But I underestimated the length of the production process. It took 3 years to get to the first stage, and unfortunately he passed away in the meantime.

Did his death have any impact on the completion of the film?

It completely messed me up. On a personal level, at first. But also, I lost part of my motivation to make this film, because I used to see it as a kind of dialogue, a respectful game with him. He died a week before we started editing. First I thought that I had to rethink the film completely. And then I felt that the right thing to do was, instead, to finish it in the exact same way as I had started it: as a celebration of the living.

Coming back to music, given that you weren't allowed to use songs from Talk Talk or Mark Hollis, why did you still want to have music? You might as well have chosen not to put any music at all.

I first considered having a soundtrack that would be a sort of naturalistic field recording. One of my motivations was to imagine the viewer watching a film with no music whatsoever, but which, in the end, would make him want to make music! But I liked how this restriction opened up a space for musical creation. So I invited some musicians to jam together for three days, before the editing. That way we were able to use music right from the start of the



editing process, alongside the images and other sounds. It worked well with the whole idea of a collage made up of different materials, multiple layers, which is somewhat reminiscent of the way Talk Talk created their last two albums.

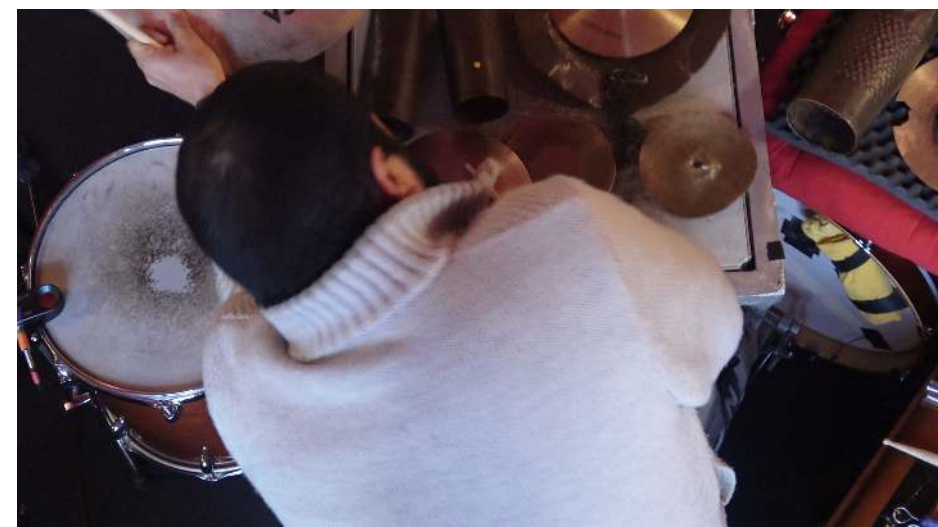
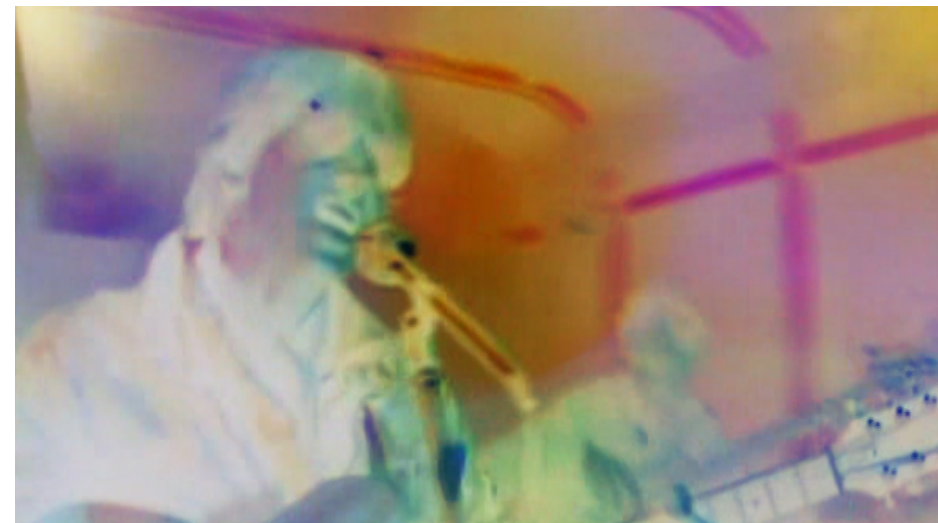
In the film, there is a whole dimension that we rarely see, elements of nature and of the English countryside, British people...

Nature is very present on Talk Talk's album covers, but even more so in the organic quality of their music. I have many images of animals, roots, craters and cliffs in my mind that I associate with their music, but instead of trying to reproduce those images by going to shoot them all over the world, I chose to evoke that dimension through the landscapes and the social environment in which their music was born.

You worked with a small crew. What was your *modus operandi* during the shooting?

When we started, we were not sure that the film would be financed. In total, there were three shootings in England. They followed each other through the stages of production, so as not to lose the momentum and our will to see the project through to the end. There were two different teams depending on the shooting times, each composed of people I share a lot with. And since I spent a long time trying to meet Talk Talk's former members before I knew whether they'd accept or not, a certain level of improvisation emerged over the course of our travels. It resulted in a sort of road-movie where the crew becomes a character in the film.

By David Mennessier, March 2020





TALK TALK is an English band who, from their first albums («The Party's Over» - 1982, «It's My Life» - 1984), found themselves almost unwillingly linked to the New Romantic Pop movement. At the peak of their glory («The Colour of Spring» - 1986), they began an organic quest that broke with industry codes and with that era where technology was transforming music («Spirit of Eden» - 1988, «Laughing Stock» - 1991). After the split of the band, singer Mark Hollis recorded a unique solo album, completely acoustic (1998). The other members of the band - Paul Webb, Lee Harris, Tim Friese-Green - subsequently undertook personal musical projects (O'Rang, Rustin Man, Heligoland...).



MATHIAS GENTLE PAGE HASSAN

SOLICITORS

Gwen Breës

Our Ref: DG/JM/H76.2

By email: [REDACTED]

Dear Ms Breës

Our Client: Mark Hollis

We act for Mark Hollis who as you will be aware is the author and owner of the copyright of the music included in the Talk Talk albums and his own albums including particularly Spirit of Eden and Laughing Stock.

Our client has been put on notice via an email from his producer Phill Brown that you have planned a documentary film project based on his music.

We are asked to inform you that under no circumstances will our client wish to co-operate or to be seen to be associated with this product and would not agree to grant any use of his music in relation with that production.

In the circumstances we would be grateful if you would immediately confirm that you will not be proceeding with this venture.

Yours faithfully



Mathias Gentle Page Hassan LLP

----- Message transféré -----

Sujet : RE: Our Client: Mark Hollis

Date : Thu, 15 Sep 2016 16:10:23 +0000

De : [REDACTED]

Pour : [REDACTED]

Dear Gwenaël,

Thank you for your letter and kind words. I'm delighted to hear that these records should have had such a positive effect on you.

However, in regard to your proposed project, I must make the point that I would be wholly against a film being made in connection to these albums, since I prefer that they be allowed to stand alone and exist in their own right.

I realise that you have the best of intentions in mind, and these are much appreciated, but I hope that you will understand and respect my position in this matter.

Best wishes,

Mark

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CHARACTERS

In the film, the director, his crew, and the musicians who improvise the soundtrack become the protagonists on screen. The real main characters (the former members of Talk Talk) have all refused to participate, in consistency with the silence they have maintained for 30 years. However, they are present there through several archives, but above all through testimonies:

- **Jim Irvin.** Journalist (Mojo, Melody Maker...) who met them when they still accepted to make interviews
- **Ian Curnow.** Keyboardist on the second and third Talk Talk albums, who lived the glory of the band's pop period, until Mark Hollis rejected any form of synthetic material
- **Phill Brown.** Sound engineer with a remarkable career (Traffic, Jimi Hendrix, Joe Cocker, Leonard Cohen, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Led Zeppelin, Bob Marley, Cat Stevens, Brian Eno, Robert Palmer, Dave Gilmour, Faithless, Tricky, Midnight Choir...) whose life and career were transformed by the experience of «Spirit of Eden» and «Laughing Stock», each recorded in the dark over a period of 9 months. He also worked with Mark Hollis on his only solo album

The film also meets, among others, bassist **Simon Edwards** and percussionist **Martin Ditcham** (who were among the dozens of guest musicians on «Spirit of Eden» and «Laughing Stock»), painter **James Marsh** (designer of all the covers of Talk Talk)... Or guitarist **Wilko Johnson** (Dr. Feelgood, Ian Dury & The Blockheads...), singer **Barrie Masters** (Eddie & The Hot Rods) and harmonica player **Lew Lewis** (Reformer, The Clash, The Stranglers...), who anchor the roots of Talk Talk in both the punk spirit and the pub-rock movement, and in the seaside town of Southend-on-Sea (Essex).



MUSICIANS

« At first, Mark Hollis' response and the ban on using Talk Talk music appeared to me as insurmountable obstacles. And then, I saw it as an invitation to imagine other paths... I brought together 5 musicians who had never played together but who shared an attitude of exploration and experimentation. Without knowing the music of Talk Talk or trying to reproduce it, they improvised the music of a film that didn't yet exist. »

- **Benjamin Collin (France)**

Drummer-noise improviser, whose style joyfully blends contemporary jazz, rock, punk, screams and philosophical texts, he has notably played in the Fantazio Gang, Joujou, Babil Sabir, he collaborates in dance and theatre performances, and publishes collections of poetry.

- **Fantazio (France)**

Double bass-man, performer, elephant singer, actor, vertiginous improviser, cultural punk who takes the most eclectic paths, he sometimes makes records but above all multiplies the most varied shows and stage collaborations, placed under the sign of instinct.

- **Clément Nourry (Belgium)**

Guitarist for various groups and artists (Joy as a Toy, Nicolas Michaux...), accompanist for Butô dance performances, he made his first solo escape in 2016, an introspective record composed of instrumental wanderings and sound haikus.

- **Alice Perret (Belgium)**

Pianist and viola player, she takes paths that lead her from classical to electroacoustic, from rock to jazz, from Mohamed Abozekry to Jeanne Added, from Bebe Prince Bissongo to Loïc Lantoiné, from Yasmina Sana to Anne Sylvestre, from David Walters to the Zozophonic Orchestra...

- **Grégoire Tirtiaux (Belgium)**

All-terrain saxophonist, always on the lookout for new sounds, he practices music as a meeting ground, seeking to combine contemporary music with deep roots, speaking to the soul, making his brass instruments resonate to music that is sometimes traditional, sometimes trance, meditative, improvised...



CREW & TECHNICAL DETAILS

« With my team, we followed in the footsteps of the musicians of Talk Talk. Go breathe the air they breathed and explore the landscapes that rocked them... »

Gwenaël Breës (direction, image)

Marie Brumagne David (sound)

Maxime Coton (sound)

Mathieu Haessler (image)

Alice Riou (assistance)

Bram Van Cauwenberghe (sound)

Marie-Hélène Mora & Gwenaël Breës (editing)

Maxime Coton (mixing)

Paul Millot (Colour grading)

Julie Freres (Production)

Vincent Terlinchamp (Production manager)

2020 - 88' - Colour - OV ENG & FR / FR & ENG ST

A film by GWENAËL BREËS Produced by JULIE FRERES Image editing MARIE-HÉLÈNE MORA et GWENAËL BREËS Mixing MAXIME COTON Colour grading PAUL MILLOT A production DÉRIVES In co-production with SAVAGE FILM, CBA - CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL À BRUXELLES, RTBF - UNITÉ DOCUMENTAIRE Produced with the help of CENTRE DU CINÉMA ET DE L'AUDIOVISUEL DE LA FÉDÉRATION WALLONIE BRUXELLES and DU SERVICE PUBLIC FRANCOPHONE BRUXELLOIS, FONDS AUDIOVISUEL DE FLANDRE (VAF), TAX SHELTER DU GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL BELGE

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BIOFILMO GWENAËL BREËS

Gwenaël Breës was born at the end of 1973 in Brussels. In his youth, he created fanzines and hosted broadcasts on free radios. When he left school at the age of 14, he started to be self-taught in activities such as journalism (he has initiated and coordinated several publications, and published two investigative books on social issues), or the animation of so-called «alternative» cultural venues in Brussels. He is one of the founding members of Cinema Nova, opened in 1997 in the centre of Brussels, run by a collective and which offers an original research programme dedicated to contemporary independent cinema.

He is very interested in urban dynamics and has directed or co-directed several radio creations and documentary films (short and feature films, self-produced or collective) on these issues, in the context of Brussels. «In a Silent Way» is his first film that takes a completely different trajectory, starting from a more personal subject, shot in another country and benefiting from a real production.