

# NEW YORK

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POP

## OUT OF A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS DOVEMAN STEPS GINGERLY INTO THE SPOTLIGHT.

BY CARL SWANSON

**T**HOMAS BARTLETT, who performs his quiet, wry music under the name Doveman, seems to suffer from the exact opposite of the usual musician's need for the crowd. Eyes closed, he sings in a near whisper, bent close over the piano as if it could protect him from the audience. "I like to hide onstage as much as possible," he says. "It's an odd desire, given that I'm up there in the first place, to be in any way invisible, far off to the side and in the shadow." Until recently, he refused to play by himself, presenting Doveman as a collective, or a musical salon, deferring to friends and collaborators like Sean Lennon, Justin Bond, or Norah Jones.

Despite naming his most recent album *The Conformist*, in the pop world Bartlett is anything but, and he has clearly never been driven by conventional rebellion. He grew up in Vermont, where his interests included basketball, traditional Irish music, and Chopin ("I didn't like singing, and I didn't like drums"). On the day we were to talk, he was out shopping with his mother in Soho and suggested we meet at the

coffee shop where his sister works. There, he occasionally redirects my questions to her. ("Mary, was I a music nerd?" "No. He was just a nerd.")

Bartlett graduated from high school early to study piano in London, then came to New York to attend Columbia, where he'd planned to major in English ("Music education doesn't do it for me so much—not a fan"); he still lives in his first apartment, in Harlem. After three semesters, he left school, having been adopted by the downtown sensitive-musician mafia. "I was a big Chocolate Genius fan," he remembers. The two talked after a Genius show and exchanged information. "The next week," says Bartlett, "he called and said, 'I'm playing at Joe's Pub tomorrow. Do you wanna play?'" David Byrne was in the audience at Joe's that night, as was Patrick Dilleit, who went on to produce Bartlett's albums. "I feel like pretty much every connection I've made in music can be tracked back to that show."

That and a powerful friendship Bartlett made at Columbia with Nico Muhly. And since "Nico knows everyone," says Bartlett, "you begin to meet everyone." Indeed, he was soon playing piano for arty heavyweights: Antony and the Johnsons, Laurie Anderson, Byrne, Arto Lindsay, Justin Bond, Yoko Ono, and Martha Wainwright (the two just recorded an album of Edith Piaf songs). His fluency as a musician notwithstanding, he also has a gift for getting along with demanding personalities. "He is the only piano player I have worked with who can really follow me—an almost impossible job," says Antony Hegarty, who included Bartlett in his recent tour. "Thomas has an intuitive hand; it curls around me like a fox's tail."

"To know him and to make music with him feels like the same conversation," Muhly says. "He's someone who can be a sort of vessel for musicianship, as well as a content provider. You can run things through him and it'll come out refined. Like an oyster." The two have a side project, Peter Pears (named after Benjamin Britten's lover, "an amazing tenor"), which they'll perform together later this month at the Kitchen, along with a Doveman set. It was Muhly who did the arrangements for *The Conformist*—in return for a free dinner (at Masa).

Collaboration is clearly not a challenge for Bartlett. The challenge is in being himself onstage. "His own music creaks out of him in an almost macabre way," says Hegarty, who has been encouraging Bartlett's solo performances.

"It's important for me to feel that I can walk on the stage alone and hold an audience's attention," says Bartlett, who opened, alone, for the Swell Season on their tour last fall. He's tentatively pleased with the experience. ■

DOVEMAN AND  
PETER PEARS: AN  
EVENING WITH  
THOMAS BARTLETT  
AND NICO MUHLY.  
THE KITCHEN,  
MARCH 18 AND 19.  
8 P.M.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EZRA CALDWELL