



**IRASCIBLE  
MUSIC**



**Thao & The Get Down Stay Down  
Bio for *A Man Alive*  
Ribbon Music, 2016**

Thao & The Get Down Stay Down—the San Francisco–based band fronted by singer and songwriter Thao Nguyen—releases their fourth album, *A Man Alive*, on March 4, 2016. Following the critical success of *We The Common* (2013), which was largely inspired by Thao’s volunteer work with the California Coalition for Women’s Prisoners, *A Man Alive* is an evolution in both subject matter and sound. Thao says: “I wanted *A Man Alive* to be beat- and bass-driven—rather than guitar-based—extending and elaborating upon the hip-hop influences of the previous record. *A Man Alive* is more instrumental, more riff- and loop-centric, and has more manipulated sounds.” The Get Down Stay Down are at their best on this record, and Thao herself experimented with programming drumbeats for several tracks, although live drums are also played on every song.

Mostly recorded at Tiny Telephone Studios in San Francisco, *A Man Alive* was produced by Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards. Collaborating with Garbus, who is a close personal friend, allowed Thao to achieve the sound she had been striving for on previous releases. “Looking back,” she says, “I was less sure of what I wanted. With this record I had clearer vision and aspirations. I wanted emotion. I wanted power. I wanted beats. Merrill’s priority was that I take songs and ideas and run with them; she pushed us all over the place. She carved out time and space for us to experiment at will and fostered a very supportive, creative environment. Everyone was compelled to go beyond what they were comfortable doing. Musician-wise we kept it tight knit because the songs were so personal and vulnerable, and it was such an intense process, I only wanted those who know me well.”

*A Man Alive* finds Thao exploring darker and more personal territory than in her earlier songwriting. She grew up in Northern Virginia, on the outskirts of Washington, DC. When Thao was young, her father left the family. She helped out in her mother’s laundromat as a teenager, sitting at the counter with a guitar, making change for customers, working on her first songs, and playing at open mics in the evenings. Her father drifted in and out of their lives.

“The record is essentially about my relationship with my dad, its trajectory. It’s a document of my life in conjunction with his, even though we’ve always been leading our lives away from each other. Some are optimistic and forgiving, some are the opposite. There are songs from his perspective: I imagined what it would be like to have kids and choose to exist without them, or feel like you have to save them from yourself. I realized there was this relationship that I never really talk about, realized it’s defined so much of me. So it was a point of reckoning. The record wrote itself. Painstakingly, of course.”



The emotional center of *A Man Alive* is the gorgeous, plaintive “Millionaire,” a song about a wayward father. While the song could have ended up as a folk ballad, its instrumentation and atmosphere is of a piece with the rest of the album, pushed along by heavily reverbed synthesizer, a simple guitar riff, and subdued drums and bass. “That’s a sad fucking song,” Thao said. “I remember walking out of the vocal booth, and I saw Merrill tearing up. It’s uncompromisingly sad, which I don’t traffic well in. It took a lot.”

Much of *A Man Alive* is vibrant and danceable—including standout tracks such as “Astonished Man,” “Slash/Burn,” “Nobody Dies,” and “Meticulous Bird”—and the juxtaposition of that exuberance with the dark themes explored in the lyrics is one of the album’s great achievements. The songs are often punctuated by handclaps, sing-along choruses, and ass-shaking beats. While these songs come from a deeply personal origin, they have such an accessible quality that it is easy to imagine an engaged and participatory live audience. “I suspect that’s always been my motive,” Thao says, “but this is the most actualized that it’s ever been. I wanted to make a record that was very introspective and personal, but it would also seek to communicate. And we would have fun performing it—not just fun, but I wanted a kind of crazy, rabid, animal energy. That’s my favorite thing about performing—you can tap into this frenzy. We want people to dance and feel. And I want to do that every night, too.”

*A Man Alive* is undoubtedly a new career highlight for Thao & The Get Down Stay Down. The album presents a fiercely original group sound that is rife with experimentation and playfulness. It demonstrates Thao’s development as a songwriter. And it achieves that most elusive quality in music—to create an album of songs that are dark yet buoyant, tragic yet redemptive, personal yet inclusive.

—Dan Stone