



A still from "Singing in the Dark Times," a new short film by Alan Magee. Courtesy of Alan Magee

## 'Dark Times' bring out the many talents of artist Alan Magee

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Alan Magee was preparing paintings for an exhibition at Forum Gallery in New York when the pandemic hit, forcing the show's postponement and grinding to a halt what had been two years of intense creativity in the studio.

To view Alan Magee's movies, visit: [vimeo.com/alanmagee/](https://vimeo.com/alanmagee/) or [www.alanmageemusic.com](http://www.alanmageemusic.com)

To view a 10-minute version of a new documentary about Alan Magee, visit: [alanmageefilm.com](http://alanmageefilm.com)

At home in Cushing, surrounded by art tools and given an unexpected open calendar, Magee, 72, confronted this new world crisis not with a painting or series of prints, but with a new short film, based on one of his songs that asks: "Will there be singing in the dark times to come? Will brash, unbridled evil cloud our wits and strike us dumb? Will there be rhythms, and harmonies, and rhymes? Will there be songs? Will we be singing—in the dark times?"

The 5-minute film, "Singing in the Dark Times," brings together creative interests old and new for Magee, who is most popularly known as a painter of beach stones. He's been making music for decades, and his interest in film goes back to his youth and the revival of the atmospheric horror films of the 1930s, films like James Whale's "Frankenstein" and "The Mummy" by Karl Freund.



Alan Magee is the subject of a new documentary, *Alan Magee: art is not a solace*, by David Wright and P. David Berez. Photo by David Wright

Present throughout all of his work—music, film and 50 years of painting, prints, sculpture and tapestry—is an ongoing exploration of what the writer Barry Lopez, in a documentary about Magee, calls “the complexity of what it means to be a full-blown human being.” There is awe and wonder in his perfect paintings of beach stones, empathy and fear in the monotypes of forlorn human faces, and anger and despair in his sculptures of war-torn, twisted bodies.

And in this new short film, there is hope.

The framework of the short film was lifted from the feature-length documentary “Alan Magee: Art Is Not a Solace,” co-directed by Maine filmmakers David Wright and P. David Berez. The documentary debuted last year at the Camden International Film Festival and had been accepted into several other film festivals this spring before the pandemic sapped its momentum. As the virus escalated ever more dramatically, the directors and Magee discussed elevating the song to stand on its own.

“It was timely not only from a political sense, but we really need a message of hope right now. We thought it would be great if we could extract that section of the film, tweak it for the moment and present this song of hope,” Wright said.

With time on his hands, Magee took on the project, adapting the song as a stand-alone. He selected still images of his art to evoke unbridled evil and uncomfortable truths, and added them to footage of scenes in the recording studio in Thomaston with singer Marian Makins and guitarist Gabriel Donohue. Makins and Donohue are friends from Cushing, by way of Philadelphia.

The three have a casual way in the studio together, filling the air with a sense of calm and ease. Magee sings with the assurance of a 1960s-era folk singer, though he lacks formal musical training. One can hear echoes of Phil Ochs and Gordon Bok in Magee’s singing voice.



Alan Magee and Peter Rightmyer Morgan, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1965

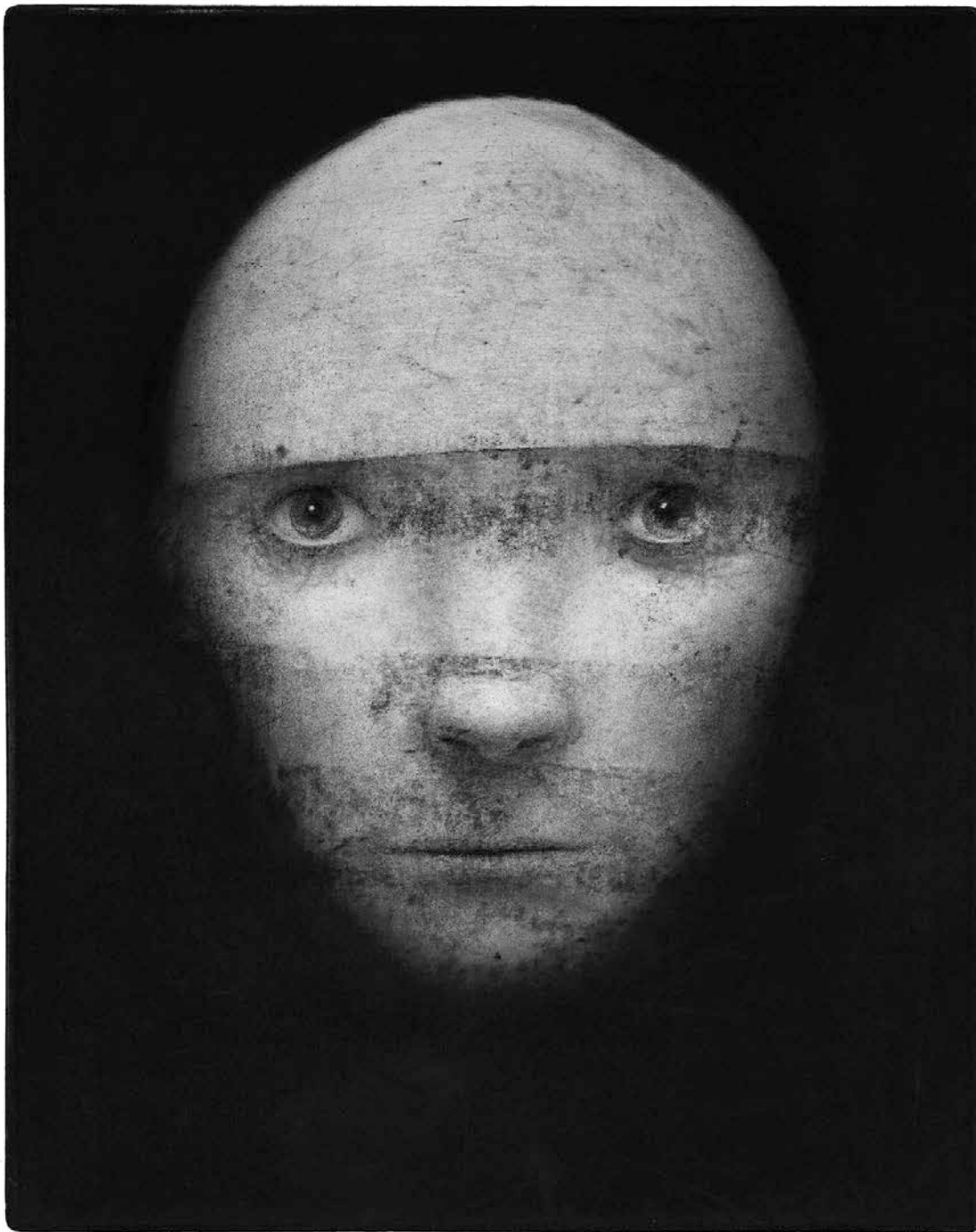
He credits Makins and Donohue, who are married, for helping him become comfortable again with live performance. For a few years after he rediscovered music, he would play his songs in the privacy of a living room with friends. With more confidence, he's been playing publicly at the Sail Power & Steam Museum in Rockland and the Grange in Martinsville, where Makins and Donohue have called him to the stage. Both are popular local venues for traditional music and both bring big crowds—"and the right crowd," Magee said, "people who love this kind of music and are up for an occasional song with a message."

Donohue, a professional musician who toured with the Chieftains, recalled one magical evening at the Martinsville Grange when "Singing in the Dark Times" "brought the audience to their feet in a spontaneous and immediate standing ovation.

The song and the short-film project have given Magee the chance to more seriously explore his long-held love of folk music and film. He's been singing and playing for more than 40 years, though not regularly.

"I was a kind of an enthusiast and participant in the folk revival that happened around '64 or '65 through the early '70s. I liked to play," Magee said. "But honestly, I just picked it up again after 40 years."

He began writing songs in 2013, after the Sandy Hook school shooting. In that moment of need, he turned to music. "I always think of myself as a visual artist, but it seemed to me I needed a more timely medium, so I got out my guitar," he said. "I wanted to write a song not just about the shooting, but about the enormous enthusiasm for guns, the great fixation on guns that we have here."



*Indictment*, ©2020 Alan Magee, monotype with watercolor and black pencil, 14 x 11 in

The song "Gun Shop" also inspired his first attempt at movie-making, a short film that combined drawings, photographs and collages to accompany the song. "That's what got me going with film," Magee said. "For the first time in our lives, we could sit down and make a film at home. It's something I had always wanted to do, but the tools were highly complicated and specialized, and filmmaking had to be done by a team of professionals. When I finally decided I wanted to do it, the tools were all right there."

Prior to "Singing in the Dark Times," he made another short, "Party Line", about mass-surveillance, that combined his original music with his artwork. "Party Line" screened at a few festivals. Wright saw it, was intrigued by Magee's filmmaking and wanted to take a closer look at the artist and his life.

"I live on the Maine coast and was very aware of Alan's work, and like so many people, I was initially more aware of the beach stones," he said. "But I immediately realized there was much more to him than just the beach stones that we are all aware of. As a documentary filmmaker, I'm interested in stories, and with Alan, there's always a deeper story worth exploring."

What began as an idea for a 10-minute documentary turned into a 60-minute in-depth profile that took four years to complete, he said.

Berez, the co-director on the feature-length documentary, sees Magee's paintings, songs and movies as part of a half-century arc of creativity that is still evolving. It's easy to distinguish one medium from another, one body of work from another. Many observers have long commented on the dichotomy of Magee's art, with the realistic colorful renderings of beach stones, for instance, standing in contrast to the haunting monotone faces, Berez said.

But it's all part of the artist's relentless journey of peeling back layers. "Alan's whole career has been dedicated to speaking truth to power, and really to unearthing the truth," Berez said.

The truth that Magee was seeking, before the pandemic changed everything, can be found in a new series of paintings of military helmets. His fascination with armor goes back at least 40 years, when he and his wife, Monika, began visiting armor collections and taking photographs of helmets in places like Graz, Berlin, Krakow and at the Met in New York. In the 1980s, he began a series of charcoal drawings which he set aside until the series emerged again within the past couple of years, when he began rendering them as large acrylic paintings.

He intended to exhibit the new helmet paintings in New York, to stand in contrast to the spare monotypes of scared, empty faces.



Paintings of helmets in Alan Magee's studio. The paintings were destined for New York when the pandemic hit. Courtesy of Alan Magee

To some, the helmets might be seen as forbidding, inhuman even, and the cause of the anguish on the faces of society's most vulnerable. To others, the helmets might represent the last layer of protection against an advancing evil, or a thin veneer of bravery.