

On knowing when the time is right



Musician and producer Randall Dunn on waiting to make his first solo album, what he learned from working on film scores with the late Jóhann Jóhannsson, and what you learn from years of collaborating.

December 12, 2018 -

As told to J. Bennett, 2270 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Production](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#).

You once described yourself as a frustrated filmmaker who has since become a producer and recording engineer. Can you tell me a little bit about that process—how you went from one to the other?

I started originally wanting to work in film and be a director. In high school, me and my friends made these crazy VHS movies that we would edit at the community access cable station in our hometown. I hadn't ever really thought about making music, but I was always interested in music and at that time—the late '80s and early '90s—it was hard not to be. And so music was always kind of going hand in hand with how I thought about film or scenery. I ended up going to Seattle to look into doing sound design for film, and then I fell in with this group of musicians there who were all really incredible and super active at the time.

And then I just sort of went in that direction because everybody I was working with was so creative visually. I found it easy to plug the same sort of creativity into that, and it just kind of became a career in the end. Now I'm starting to get more opportunities doing music for film, which I'm totally loving and it's marrying the two things together again. I'm also working with a video director a lot with some concepts I had for my record, so I find myself creeping back in that direction.

Like your recent work on the *Mandy* soundtrack, for instance. How did you hook up with composer Jóhann Jóhannsson?

I was working with this Danish band called Sort Sol in Denmark, and he ended up doing some string arrangements for one of the pieces that I was working on. It had Stephen O'Malley and some other people on it as well. I worked closely with him and the band on the song, and we just briefly talked about my work with Anna [von Hausswolf] and some other people and we had a really nice interaction. When he found out I was in New York, he invited me over to help out on some other projects that he was working on. One of them was his own film that he was doing, and once we got talking, I really related with him because he also was kind of a frustrated filmmaker—[he was] just starting to make this film that hasn't been released. Working on the music for that with him, he really liked that I was not shy about stating a strong feeling or strong direction and I think we connected in that way.

He told me he had this possibility of working on a soundtrack with Panos Cosmatos who's work I knew through Jeremy [Schmidt] from Black Mountain, who had worked on the score *Beyond the Black Rainbow*. I've worked with Black Mountain a bunch, so I was aware of Panos's work through that. I think Jóhann really understood what Panos wanted, and a lot of it had something to do with some of the work that I've done with Wolves In The Throne Room and other metal acts. So he wanted to bring something together that was like what he was doing mixed with the production of what I was doing in some of the music and people that I've worked with. He was very generous about including me

and listening to my ideas and working on that soundtrack together. That was a really, really amazing experience. I learned so much from that about career and work and film and sound. It was pretty enlightening.

What was the biggest thing you learned from that experience?

Well, there were a few things. One is that I always thought in a much more orthodox way about how films were to be done or how I imagined they were done. And watching Jóhann work, it was much more alchemical. He would move sound around in large sections, and the way he spoke about the sound relating to the film and how open he was with me experimenting and having a voice. I realized that I could interact with film in the way that I've developed making music, so it was really inspiring. Seeing someone who I thought was amazing validating my process and how I make music—and that it didn't always have to start as, "Well, we have to write this full orchestra piece," you know? [Laughs] Although he was fully capable of that. And the other thing was just learning a lot more about taking care of yourself and interacting with so many more team members and personnel than you would with a normal record. Also, learning a lot more about workflow and stamina—all of those things.

What was the scoring process like?

We were doing demos and stuff throughout the year, and we were also talking about the aesthetics of what we wanted to do. Panos was very involved—he had a very specific understanding of what he wanted to do with the film, so we were just kind of following that. Panos and I and some of the other people involved were talking about ways to do that, the type of synthesizers we were going to use, and mostly we were talking about personnel—like who would be a really amazing artist who would come and add to it and help see the whole concept through.

What did you think of the visuals you were working on music for?

You know, it was interesting. It's pretty violent, so you have to find a space where you're understanding the context of the violence. Because you work on small sections at a time, and if you're only watching the outcome of the violence, you can lose your way pretty easily [as far as] the operatic or romantic side of what the movie's actually about, and some of the things underneath that Panos has said that it's about.

So it's kind of like a constant calibration of not getting lost in a microcosm—for me, anyway. Constantly zooming out, checking in with some of the other scenes around the one you're working on, talking with Jóhann about where he wanted to go with things—a lot of checking in. But it's difficult to watch something like that, that has violence over and over again and it's... it's a really psychedelic journey and when you're working on that for one and a half months straight for 12 hours a day, you sort of join the lead character in a lot of ways, you know. [Laughs] I felt pretty connected to Nicolas Cage by the end of it.

Does the process of seeing certain scenes over and over again—along with working on this music and presumably hearing the same parts over and over again—did that dull the overall effect for you when you finally saw the finished film?

It didn't for me, but this is an unusual circumstance because the finishing of this was so emotional, you know, just from Jóhann's passing, that I think all of the people who were involved in it had their own unique experience. For me, the very end result was actually a big release and some of that had to do with the film itself being absolutely incredible and understanding that people were really loving it—and then also sort of having a very fond memory of powering through, making a really complicated score with Jóhann.

Since he passed away before the film came out, did he ever see the final cut?

I'm not sure if he saw the the final finished version or not. He may have seen a final cut as he was still alive when it was finished, but I hadn't heard what he thought about that because he was diving into other projects. He was super focused and deep in his work.

Jóhann really encouraged you to work on the music that would become your solo album, *Beloved*.

He got to hear some things that I was working on, which, at the time, I didn't know was an album. I think it was kind of a partial job interview, [laughs], so I played him some of the music from my record that I had been working on and I played him some of the things I'd been working on over the years because I'd been chipping away at something but never really knowing specifically what language I wanted to have when I finally did it. And he was just really encouraging about the whole thing, which is one of the reasons I think he asked me—not only from a recording standpoint and who I had worked with, but also as a musician—to work on the score [for *Mandy*].

There's a quote from you in the bio that went out with *Beloved*: "As a producer, we tend to be way too hard on ourselves with our own music and for a long time I was preoccupied with fitting into someone else's language or I didn't feel the language I was using was unique enough, but this record just fell out of the sky." When you're so completely immersed in other people's music—as you are on a daily basis—does it become difficult to find your own voice sometimes?

I think for a super long time for me it did. I've made records for more than 20 years now, and I've seen so many styles of creative processes, and that has been really inspiring to me. It's allowed me to inhabit different ways of working without feeling... you know, to learn from people's mistakes or learn from what works. And I think for a long time, that was like me going to music school or me going to learn how different people deal with creativity in their life and how they pay for things or handle a budget.

By the time I got around to doing my own record, it was really like, "I'll focus on something specific." I'm 44 now and it's my first solo record, and there was just a lot less mystery about how I wanted to approach it, what I could do, and how confident I felt about being in a recording session or working with certain sounds or synths. So it's really a culmination of a lot of learning through the privilege of getting paid to work on really amazing artists' records, and being influenced by them and me influencing them, and the long relationships that you have in this business of making records.

For me, the time that I have in the studio with people is much more about the art, and the making of the actual thing—not so much the thing that I think prepared me for this. And working on that film with Jóhann might've been the very last element I needed to feel really good and clear about what I wanted to do. I also took a lot of time off after Jóhann passed and decided to make the space to make a record and finish what I had recorded.

How did you approach *Beloved* differently than other records you've been involved in?

I was reading this interesting essay about how Orthodox Christian icons are painted, where they start with black. But their black is not representative of a one-dimensional situation. The negative space is actually another dimension. When you're looking into the black it's like a void or like a further consciousness to consider. And I started really thinking about that when I made this record... rather than just filling every space. The other thing I wanted to do was a record that relied on synthesizers without getting into a lot of what's going on right now where everything's retro, like *Stranger Things* or [John Carpenter](#) worship. I mean, I love all of that music and it's an influence, but I wanted to do something that felt like it came from the earth even though it was electronic instruments.

When you're involved in that many aspects of one record—writing and performing the music while also recording, producing, and eventually mixing—is it easy to lose perspective?

Well, I think that's one of the great things about having made records for a very long time with other people—I felt like I finally learned lessons in how to let go of stuff. There's a piece of great advice I got from Alan Bishop from Sun City Girls, who said, "Make hard decisions very fast and then stick to them." I've always loved that idea for working in the studio, and I think it's a lot more old-school than the way records are usually done. Because with digital, the process makes you favor things much more than you'd be able to with doing it in that older process. So I feel really great that I was able to do stuff before computers dominated, because it allows you to let go of the steering wheel. Just having that presence when you're listening deeply to let things be and knowing that they're good before you cover it all up with paint.

Randall Dunn Recommends

Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: Mysticism in Music from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde by Jocelyn Godwin

True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art by Chögyam Trungpa

Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice by Pauline Oliveros

Plainwater: Essays and Poetry by Anne Carson

Herbie Hancock: Buddhism and creativity / Mahindra Humanities Center Lecture

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Vocation

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