On weaving your own path

Producer and composer Craig Leon opens up about the circuitous history of his creative work, what it really means to be a generous producer and a thoughtful creator, and why curiosity and adaptability are so important.

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As told to Noah Kardos-Fein, 3964 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration, Process, Collaboration, Multi-tasking, Production.

You've worked with quite a few influential musicians from the past half a century, from punk and new wave bands to Pavarotti. You worked on major films but also released a couple of underground synthesizer albums. Not many people cross over from the classical music world to the rock and pop world to film and back again. How do you trace your trajectory? Is it easy to identify the paths you carved out for yourself?

My trajectory, it would be one of those—when you used to see the test launch missiles from Cape Canaveral. It would go up and then it would just go all over the place. I just do whatever I want to do. It's not genre-specific or anything.

How much of it could you see coming? When you look back on your career, can you identify those moments where there was a fork in the road and you made a specific choice, or at least recognize a chain of events that led you here? How do you make sense of that?

We can get real philosophical. There are things like that. You make a decision and it leads to something else. It can be a very minor decision where you go, "Oh, I'm going to do this and I'm going to have this background singer on this record," and then she ends up working with you for 40 years, alongside you. Of course, there's the fate aspect and all that.

There's a thing that hangs on the wall in my studio. It's a big tall painting by an American painter who was my neighbor in his old age. He lived relatively close to the studio where I was in the countryside when I worked out there in Vermont. He's a fella named Ivan Albright who was from Chicago. The little painting—well, it's not little, it's big—is called *That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do*. It's a super realistic vision of flowers on a grave at a funeral. That painting sticks over my head whenever I'm writing or playing or doing anything.

The thing is, you do what you think you have to do and don't care about the consequences or anything. Even if you don't do it, we're all still going to end up in that painting. You might as well as have had a good a time and done as much as you possibly can, and created as much as you can, and leave as much behind as you can.

Sometimes I think I could have done a lot more "classical" work, and a lot less producing bands, but I chose a lot of things early on in my career to help other people generate what they wanted to do in music. I didn't sublimate what I actually did, but I kept it more or less in the secondary part of my career, although I did it all the time. Now that I'm older, I've reversed that. I don't produce anybody anymore. I figure after all these years, I get to do something of my own. That's my decision now so I don't face that decision once it's too late: "Oh, I should have done this or I should have one that." Right now I'm in the phase of *I'm doing it.*

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Over many years of making and producing music, have you discovered ways to plan for those circumstances or avoid these "would've," "could've," "should've" scenarios?

It's just something instinctual. You get a feeling that this is a good idea and you just do it. Not all of them are good. There are times you do go down a road and you're thinking, "This is not such a great idea," and you move onto something else. It changes as you change. Everything is an interaction with something else. That's kind of why I started a label at a time when nobody in his right mind should be starting a label.

I was going to ask you about that.

It isn't going to make me any money, I'll tell you that. It's costing me loads of money already, loads of money that I don't have. The thing is, maybe I'm not always involved with interpreting someone's music, but if I feel that they have something to say, I can help at least by giving them a forum to get it out. Also, it leads to different collaborations. I've already collaborated with the first two artists that I've signed. There's a third that I haven't signed that I've done collaborations with because she has her own situation set up. The label is leading me to more cooperative work with different artists at this stage. That's kind of like the pop aspect of being in a band. I was in a band last night with Marty—Martin Rev of Suicide—who is on my label. I thought, "Okay, I'll do that." It's something new.

Do you have a ritual when you're sitting down to write or produce new music?

It goes a different way for me with writing my own music. It's a completely different thing. I kind of have a soundtrack going almost all the time. Not particularly right this second, but a lot of the time. Then I just say, "Hey, that's a good one," and I earmark it and I write it out in a short score. Even things like *Nommos* were written out. They're not extemporaneous at all. Although sometimes the live performance is extemporaneous.

It sounds like you're always on the lookout for new experiences. It strikes me that the common denominator among your work—which spans decades, genres, and many different collaborators—is that it's driven by curiosity.

Or just loving some kind of genre of music and saying, "I want to do that," or incorporating it into what I do. It all has a very logical sound. It isn't all over the shop. Strangely enough, a lot of people have told me—and I don't know because I don't analyze my own work, I just do it—they say from the records that I produce and the things that I write and everything, there's a very distinct style regardless of whatever the genre is. Okay then, whatever I'm doing seems to fit into a certain pattern. To me it's the same thing. You can't be either too precious or too critical about what the source material is, or what the inspiration is, for what you're doing. I don't care what anybody says.

There's intuitive music like folk, country, blues, rock and roll, world music, and things like that, which is made by people who are just playing music without having serious study behind it. Then there's the serious study stuff. Luckily, I've done both. I grew up in the latter tradition, then threw it all away for a long time to go the intuitive direction, or at least use what I'd learned to help people make their recordings that were doing it intuitively. You can't say intuitive music is better or worse than something that's studied or constructed. The snobbery goes both ways. Some might say classical music is boring. Classical music people might look down on rock and say, "How ignorant." But hey, what's more punk than Wagner writing an entire opera in one key? The Ramones needed three chords! Wagner needed one. It's true. Just listen to Rheingold. It's fantastic. The entire opening of Rheingold is—there are some modulations later on, but it's basically in E flat for the whole bloody thing. It's wonderful.

It's not just the ingredients, it's the way you use them. Before we sat down and I started recording this interview, we'd been talking about your love of food and cooking. There's something that makes a lot of sense about a composer/producer enjoying cooking and being really good at it.

Well, Rossini was great. Rossini thought that his major achievement was inventing the steak, the Tournedos Rossini. He said he was tired of writing and he spent the last 30 or 40 years of his life as a chef.

Is it important to have that kind of mental break from your artistic work, whether it's cooking or something else?

It's sort of the same thing. I don't know… If you can be artistic in your music, you should know how to cook a potato. It's all alchemy in one way or another. That's all that we are in the earth: the interaction of chemicals, either in our brain or in our physical existence. I'm bad at a lot of things. I'm not bad at cooking, though, which is okay.

I imagine that you're the kind of person who can throw things together without measuring ingredients and doing it by the book.

Sometimes. It depends on what it is. If I'm really going to try and recreate a famous dish, I might measure. That's the difference between intuitive and classical composition.

It makes sense that your tendencies as a cook might reflect your tendencies as a musician, and vice-versa.

If I was going to do something from Robuchon or something from Escoffier–which I've done, and is ludicrous because it's kind of retro and too fattening–if I do something like that, then it's following the score, so to speak. If it's something I want to do, it will be like, "Why don't I do something that's Cajun and Chinese and a little bit of Japanese at the same time?" Just all the things that I like and my own background. It's like that. It's the same thing with writing. There's nothing that says you can't take two or three very disparate influences and put them into the same thing.

That brings things back to the various roles involved with production. These days it seems that the role of the producer, the role of a label manager, the role of the artist, the role of the recording engineer–there's less of a separation of responsibilities. The same person can end up wearing all of those hats over the course of their career, even over the course of a single project. Do you draw lines when it comes to your work?

No, I mean, I do it. I've been in the business a long time. I have my own little label now. I do all of those jobs with the label. You kind of have to because, economically, before there would have been an entire staff to do something–you would have had a person who did all the artwork, and a person who did the promotion, and a person who did the marketing plans, and a person who did the development of the artists and all of this kind of stuff. You can't afford that now. You can't afford virtually anything except to get the records made and make a little tiny bit of profit to share with the artist, if you're lucky. You have to take it upon yourself. The artists do a lot of that themselves. On the first two recordings that I've released, the artists actually were very hands-on in choosing their photographers and their layouts and all their artwork, even the marketing campaigns and things like that.

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Necessity and circumstance help shape the outcome. That reminds me of *Nommos*, for example, and how it was intended to have an orchestra on the recording but there wasn't money for it. Can you speak to your experience making due with what you have?

You're defined by your circumstances. There's this story of how cheap the first Ramones record was. There was no budget. It was a little label. They didn't have any money and they had a real cheapskate that ran the label anyway. What other people would see as a restriction, the band and I, on that particular record, saw as an opportunity to capture exactly the urgency in everything they wanted to get out in the studio. They were in revolt against these people with their heads up their butts who would take 13 weeks to get a drum track, which was starting to happen in those days. Okay, well, put your money where your mouth is. Do your record in four days. Now, anybody can do a record in four days because the equipment is a lot better and you can do it in your house.

But back then you couldn’t.

On the whole, maybe there is a little more character in the recordings made back then.

There is, because you were forced to perform it live. *The Ramones* was one of the first records done to a click track and it’s not a real click track. It was done to an audio click, a visual click rather, which was the drummer wanting to have the band get tight and have precision because they were so loose. One of the biggest problems on that record was trying to get them to all to play the same thing at the same time, which they never did do live in the beginning. He went and got a little classical metronome and–not listening to it on headphones with a click–he’d have the light flash and he’d set it up right in front of him where he was playing the drums. He’d play along with it and everybody else would have to play along with him.

It’s clear that your production experience and your own music is informed by an encyclopedic knowledge of all kinds of music. You’re able to draw on all these different references. Is it necessary as a producer or musician to have that kind of background?

It helps if you do what I do, which is to help people. There are different ways of producing. There are different kinds of producers. There’s no set formula for what’s right or wrong. It’s whatever is right for the record. There are producers who just sit there and roll joints. If they rolled the right joint at the right time, then they did their job correctly. Then, if you have another guy who sits there and charts out the whole thing, down to every rest and every beat and makes everybody play it according to that and it comes out the way that the artist wanted it to happen, then they did the right thing.

If you’re doing it the way that I particularly do it, which is from a historic perspective, I’m trying to create an individual sound for whoever I’m working with. It’s funny because I’m only working with me, so I’m trying to create an individual sound for me now. I don’t tell the people who are on my label what to do. That defeats the purpose of it, but if they ask, I’ll give my knowledge. That’s how I work.

Generally, the style of production that I do comes from a lot of my classical background. A producer who really influenced me is George Martin, who had started out doing classical arrangements of Bach on his label and then did Peter Sellers and the Beatles. There’s a guy who did a whole bunch of different kinds of things in different genres. Strange, isn’t it, that I’m talking about him? I’ve known his work very early on and luckily enough, got to work on things of his very early on. Now, I’m paying him back. Now, through a whole series of circumstances, one of the things coming out on my label this year is the film scores and original music of George Martin that I’m conducting in Berlin next month.

I’ve been working with what is now the estate, but we started it when George was still alive, from a book that I was asked to contribute to about his scoring. I found all these scores, and they’re brilliant. I said, “Let’s get these recorded because people don’t know them.” If they have been recorded, let’s record them in a different way. That’s really funny because I’m going to be producing an album of the music of a producer who influenced me. It’s really like the worm eating its tail. It’s amazing.

There’s something beautiful about that. You’ve got to know you’re doing something right if new projects give you a chance to revisit where you began. You get a chance to reinvent.

Yeah, that’s the thing. I think being inventive or reinventing are the keys right there, especially if you’re talking about dealing with creativity. We’re all influenced by other things, but to slavishly try and duplicate something else is really defeating the whole purpose. You should take all of the influences and cherry pick the things that affect you. It doesn’t mean that what I pick is better than what somebody else would pick. Somebody would listen to the same piece of music and say, “I really want to do something like what that high hat’s doing.” I’m sitting there thinking about what the overall recording effect was, or something like that. It’s equally valid. There’s no rules. That’s the main thing.

It hints at the beauty of collaboration. You have different people interpreting things each in their own way and it all comes together in one big confluence of ideas. How is it different with solo work? How did you approach

your own solo recordings?

There's no real collaboration on that except with kind of a whacked-out concept, which may or may not be true. It's very inward to write your own material. You have to look inward. Collaboration is a different thing. Collaboration is more like exploring what each other's knowledge is, given the people that you're working with and their background.

I was working with somebody who's a totally intuitive performer that I just really respect. She asked, "Why are you talking to me? I play the same five notes on the guitar for every song that I write." I said, "That's why I'm working with you. If you turn out great music doing that, it's something I can't do. You and Wagner got it right."

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It goes back to the idea of curiosity—you're always kind of looking for those moments. Simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, now with so many influences and other pieces of music at your fingertips, so many different people that you've worked with over the course of your life, is it difficult to make something that feels truly new? That doesn't feel derivative?

Yeah, actually. It is. The joy of having basically the world's music, and literature, and philosophy at your fingertips on the internet is also the restriction of what all of that is. It's a double-edged sword because you can get frustrated. Now if you think you've come up with something new, somebody has already done it and you can hear it or see it. It's in all forms of the arts, not just music. You say, "I'm going to draw the perfect house," and you draw it and even if you were a young person who didn't know what Art Nouveau was, you find out you're imitating Art Nouveau or something like that.

It's the question of taking whatever that is and then mutating it into your own personal experience. That becomes the way to make it individual. You have to absorb everything. I think it's fantastic that things that I once had to source out are now available. Even something as ubiquitous as reggae is now–now *there* was something that when I first discovered it, like eight people knew what it was. I discovered it just because I had to go do a record in Jamaica. It happened to be the music that everybody was playing in the streets and I'd go, "What's that? Oh, okay." It's not as simplistic as that, but you know what I'm saying. Now, if you want to research reggae, you can do the whole thing in an hour on your computer. You'll at least find the sources that you really want. The question is, okay, what are you going to do with it? Do something different with it.

Now, you almost have to soak in as much as possible, just let yourself absorb all of the influences at your fingertips, and then at the same time cut them off and forget them.

Yeah, you just forget it. That's the whole thing. You learn your craft. It's the same thing about when you learn composition, in the very beginning, you're learning that you're *not* supposed to do this, you're *not* supposed to do that. You *should* do this, you *should* do that. Here's how you do figured bass, and here's how you do a cadence and counterpoint. If you break the rule right off the bat, which I do all the time, it's because it sounds good. You have to know what you're supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do to know that you're actually making the best decision.

Craig Leon Recommends:

5 Favorite Authors of Decadent Supernatural Fiction

Arthur Machen – Machen creates alternative realities and parallel time streams in a distinctly personal universe. Beware before you enter it, though. Some find his writing to be an acquired taste. Some "get it" immediately. Others don't understand at all. I once loaned a copy of his *Hill of Dreams* to a lady who was interested in the fin de siècle. After a few weeks I asked her how she was getting along with it. She said that she was completely flabbergasted. She hadn't gotten past the first page. However, she had it read it several times…several hundred times in fact. It seems that by the time she would get to the bottom of the page she would swear that it was a different plot than what the one that started at the top of the page. Who knows? She may still be reading that

page today.

Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam - *The Tales* and *L'Eve Future* especially. *Axel* is quite mad.

Count Eric Stenbock - Many years ago I found his own copy of *Studies of Death* in a bookstall in Oxford. It was one of the extremely limited editions and had later belonged to Baron Corvo. I showed this to a bookseller friend who told me that I was definitely "haunted."

Vincent O'Sullivan - *The biography of Oscar Wilde* is a good read as well.

Robert W. Chambers - From *The King in Yellow* - At a costume party a macabre looking stranger is approached by two young women…

"Camilla: You, sir, should unmask.
Stranger: Indeed?
Cassilda: Indeed it's time. We have all laid aside disguise but you.
Stranger: I wear no mask.
Camilla: (Terrified, aside to Cassilda.) No mask? No mask!"

5 Favorite Books by Neo-Platonist Philosophers

Iamblichus: *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians*
The Emperor Julian: *Two Orations of the Emperor Julian: One to the Sovereign Sun, and the Other to the Mother of the Gods*
Porphyry: *Letter to his wife Marcella*
Plotinus: *The Enneads*
Proclus: *Elements of Theology*

An overview of these and all sorts of interesting works can be found in Mary Anne Atwood's *A Suggestive Inquiry Into The Hermetic Mystery*.

5 French Cheeses of Genius

Vacherin Mont D'Or
Mont Briac
La Marotte
Filetta Corsica
Cathare

Name
Craig Leon

Vocation
Producer, composer, musician, label owner