

October 31, 2018 -

As told to J. Bennett, 2447 words.

Tags: Film, Music, Production, Process, Collaboration, Success.



On not overanalyzing your own work

There have been eleven *Halloween* films at this point, including the new one. What has it been like for you to see your creation go through all these permutations, many of which you weren't involved in, over the last 40 years?

Well, I kind of left it behind way back when. It wasn't my movie anymore. The first movie I directed, I could take responsibility for, but the others, I don't. I can't. Mostly I left it behind. It's just been going on and on, year after year, and then this one I got involved with, and it got me back into it, so I'm delighted by it.

Do you find it amusing that the *Halloween* franchise has gone on for so long—or did you not pay attention when your involvement ended?

Many of them were so far from my original movie. I was involved in the second one, and the third one, and then this one—the recent one—but the others are just so far away. They weren't anything to do with what I did, so I just ignored them.

And some of them weren't very good. Did that bother you?

[laughs] Well, there was nothing I could do about it, so whether it bothers me or not, that's the way it is. It's weird. It's just the way it is.

What about the new film prompted you to get involved again?

Well, there were several things. [Producer] Jason Blum kind of convinced me that it might be a good idea to go ahead and try to make this one better—just sort of shepherd it through—and offer advice that doesn't have to be taken, but offer advice. I did the music to it, which was fun to do, and it just seemed appealing to try, rather than sit on the sidelines, to go ahead and give it a shot and try to make it better, so that's what I did.

What do you think it is about *Halloween* that's prompted so many sequels and reboots and re-imaginings? It's unique among your films in that regard. I mean, none of your other movies have been redone so many times.

[laughs] Well, it's scary, I guess. I think the reason it was copied and redone is that it was an inexpensive film that made a lot of money. That attracts... Everybody in Hollywood perks up and says, "Ooh. All it is is a guy in a mask? Let's do that."

Do you think that this will be the last *Halloween* film?

[laughs] I don't know. I never know. I've thought that before, but I was wrong.

How did you approach the music for this new film? It's obviously a different process than the one you did 40 years ago.

Oh, yeah. Big time. First of all, I'm working with my son and godson, which is just delightful. We've made four records together, so we work well together. I started by realizing that the music from the original score was going to be of use to us, but we're gonna refashion it with modern technology, and put it in a slightly different context than the original. We had the old music, but then we created some brand-new music, so there's a two-pronged approach.

[Director] David Gordon Green and I, we went through a spotting process, which composers and directors always do. The director tells the composer where he wants the music. "I'd like it here in this." As a composer, I would take notes, and say, "What do you want this particular piece of music to convey to the audience? What can we help with here? What do you feel like here?" David was very literate in terms of music, so it was a great process.

When you did the score for the original 1978 movie, you weren't actually watching the film as you were

scoring. You were doing it blind.

Yeah. Well, that's one way to do it—to go ahead and just compose music without seeing the film, and then cut the music in where necessary. That's what I did originally, because I didn't have the money to sync it up, but this movie was done by watching the movie.

What would you say are the pros and cons of each approach?

Well, it all comes down to the same thing: Music has to serve a purpose, help the movie, support the movie. It's easier when you're doing it frame by frame, watching the film, because you can really attend to certain things, but either is valid. Overall, I prefer watching the movie. I prefer doing it as the movie's unfolding.

Due to time and budgetary constraints, you wrote the original *Halloween* score, and many of your early scores, in just a few days. How do you think that fueled the creative process? Did working under pressure help, do you think?

No. [laughs] It never helps. It's terrible. You know, you just have to do it, because it's a necessity. But it doesn't help you. No. Everybody, having more time is better. It's always better.

Was there some sense of adapting your music to David Gordon Green's directing style? Did you have that kind of feeling as you were doing this?

In a sense, yeah. I mean, it's all about David's vision. The footage that he got and cut together, we would support that. That's our job as composers.

Do you consider the listener very much—or, the audience in the case of a film—when you're writing music? Or is it strictly the film itself that you are composing to?

It's always the viewer. You're always concerned about what the audience is experiencing as they're watching the movie. But you're servicing the film, the story, and the blow-by-blow of the movie, so it's both.

As you mentioned, the new score, like a lot of your recent music, is the result of a collaboration with your son and godson. Do you prefer that to just working on your own?

I mean, I'm enjoying this because it's a family operation. I could do it alone, too—it's just harder [that way]. This is easier, and my son and godson bring talents to the table that I don't have, so that I like. I want them to do the work and I just receive the accolades. That's all I care about. I want to exploit the young. That's what I want to do. [laughs]

You've written these fantastic *Lost Themes* albums with your son and godson as well. What changes when you're writing music that's just going to exist on its own as an album, versus when you're doing a score for a film? Is there a different attitude about writing that goes into that?

It's just a different process. You're not looking at a visual image. You're trying to *conjure up* a visual image. You're trying to create a visual image for the listener, but it's a similar process. My composing is all instinctual. It's all improv. It just comes out. Whether there's an image there or not, it just comes out.

Are you the type of person who wakes up in the middle of the night like, "Oh, I have this great idea. I have to get this down right now"?

No. God, no. [laughs] I don't want to wake up in the middle of the night. I want my sleep. For me, I approach everything as "just do it," and out of doing it comes the creativity. It's not, "Let me sit on a block of ice and wait for inspiration." That never works. I don't care about that. I'm plenty inspired all the time. I'm just, "Let's get to work, boys." "Okay. Here we go." That does it.

So the process itself will lead to the result.

Well, I've done it so much. Yeah. It always does. It always is the same thing, which is I get up, and I say to myself, "I've gotta finish this. Let's go." And that's it.

Do you have a routine for making music? Is there a certain time of day that works best, or are there things you do beforehand?

Well, we usually start around noon. We'll work that half-day, and then watch some basketball at night, that kind of thing. Maybe play a video game on the way or something, you know?

Do you stockpile ideas? Do you have things that you work on and then abandon, and come back to, or do you just kind of plow ahead and finish everything?

I have ideas, sure, and some of the musical ideas are recorded and put away, then worked on later. But if I'm gonna score a movie, I'm just gonna go from beginning to end, and score it, and finish it.

Nothing on this new film, then, was a piece of music that you've had sitting around that you've now

developed for the movie?

No.

What about the *Lost Themes* stuff? Has any of that music been kicking around for a little bit?

No. It's the same kind of situation. I mean, that was different because it started as just improvisation with my son, and then developed into albums, but it's the same thing. It's creating music. It's all the same. It's a lot of fun. It's a whole lot easier than directing a movie. It's a lot easier on my lifestyle, and it's joyful, so I mean, I can't knock it. I love it.

Has your way of writing or composing changed over the years? Do you approach it differently than you did when you started?

No. Same old shit. There's a famous *Dirty Harry* line that Clint Eastwood delivered. He says, "A man's got to know his own limitations." Those are very good words to live by. I know my own limitations. I have minimal chops as a musical artist. I get by, but I don't push myself too far because I just can't do it. I can't play with some of the big boys. My son, on the other hand, has an enormous talent and fluency with a keyboard. I don't. I know my limitations, so I make music within my limitations. I'm not gonna go further than that. I can't.

I've been reading some Lester Bangs, the great rock critic from the '70s, and he talks about the purity of the musician who isn't fully schooled. They're able to kind of tap into something that the kid who went to Julliard maybe is too far away from.

Well, maybe. I mean, "the purity"—that's very nice of him to say that. Spoken like a man who has no idea what music is about. [Laughs] It's great to say that. I love [that] he says that.

Obviously, the main *Halloween* theme is classic, and well-known around the world. What are the challenges involved with working with a piece of music that's so firmly established?

Here's the thing: *Halloween's* main theme, the theme that everybody knows, is really simple. A four-year-old can learn it. It's where you use it, and the instrumentation that you use. We use a combination of piano and bells on it, and all sorts of things in the background to make it bigger, but it's really simple. I mean, real simple. It's not a challenge. It's just, "Make it sound good."

You were a musician before you ever started making films. Do you think music led you to movies in some way?

No. Movies are my first love. My big love. I fell in love with cinema when I was little. Music was second nature to me because my dad was an accomplished musician, but movies were magic. Cinema is my main love.

You haven't made a movie in a long time, obviously, but you've made—

Thank god. Thank god. The world rejoices.

But you've made a ton of music in the last few years.

Yeah.

Do you think you've said everything you need to say with movies, and now you've moved on to a new way of communication?

No. Look, man: Making a movie, directing a movie, is like working in a coal mine. It's really brutal, and it just wreaks havoc on you, on your personal life, on your health, on everything. So there came a point when I said, "I gotta stop this shit. I gotta do something else. This is too hard. I don't want to do this. It's no fun." The process is really brutal. I still love movies, but she's a harsh, harsh mistress.

Do you ever start working on something musically and end up abandoning it?

Well, sometimes, but rarely. You know, I'll just put something aside. We'll improvise some blues or some rock 'n' roll. I'm not gonna do much with it. I just kind of put it aside for a minute. I don't know. I don't think about this. If you want to know my process, it's simply, "Let's sit down, make some music." Period. That's what it's all about, and then, "Let's do something else. Let's not overanalyze it." What's that guy's name, the critic from *Rolling Stone*? Lester who?

Oh, Lester Bangs.

All right. Okay. That's all. I just wanted to know his name.

Oh, yeah. Well, that "let's do something else" is interesting, though. Do you think that's a crucial part of the process as well, then—the idea that you will get up, work on music for a while, and then stop, and as you said, play a video game or watch some basketball? Is that kind of—

Sure. It's fine. I mean, yeah. It's part of life. You're trying to integrate this stuff into your life.

That's all important. You can't do that with a movie, directing a movie. You can't do it. It is your life. There is no other life. It's horrible. After a while, you say, "No more."

Do you feel like hammering away at something for days and weeks on end is maybe not as healthy as just doing it in small bursts?

Well, no. Directing a movie, you have to do it from beginning to end. It's every day. You don't get any sleep, but it's every single day until it's done. But making music is a different situation. Just take me at my word. [laughs] I'm telling you the truth here. I'm not hiding anything.

Essential John Carpenter:

Lost Themes – 2015 (music)

Lost Themes II – 2016 (music)

Halloween – 1978 (film)

The Fog – 1980 (film)

Escape from New York – 1981 (film)

The Thing – 1982 (film)

Name

John Carpenter

Vocation

Director, Writer, Composer

Fact



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