

On horror, inspiration, and taking your time



Musician Bobby Krlic on the influence of horror on his work, the emotional connection necessary for a fulfilling collaboration, and the process involved in creating the score for Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

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As told to Meredith Graves, 3090 words.

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When did horror, or horror films, and music first intersect for you? When did that combination become something you wanted to work with?

When I was young, I was obsessed with cinema. I used to actually want to be a film director before I ever thought I wanted to be a musician, even though I played music all the time. But from a pretty early age, I was obsessed with films that were way beyond my understanding and age range.

My parents had bought me one of those VCR and TV combo things for my bedroom. In Britain at the time, in the '90s, you had BBC2 and Channel 4. And often in the early hours of the morning, they would have European cinema programs, or they'd show a lot of David Cronenberg movies, stuff that was quite left of center for the time. I would read about these films and be so intrigued by the descriptions of them, and whatever sort of still image they'd used in the guides that go alongside it. I used to set the timer on the video to record these films, and I would get up early and try and watch them before I went to school. I was probably about, I don't know, 11 or 12 at the time.

I think part of being young is being intrigued by the world around you, and the possibilities of what you can see and hear. There's something about particularly disturbing or provocative imagery at that age that really spoke to me. I found it kind of exciting. I mean, I know that a lot of people refer to my music as being unsettling or dark or ominous. It's not that I don't agree—I think some of it definitely is, but I also don't find that *discomforting*. If you're allowed to experience it in a somewhat safe space, I think you can find comfort in discomfort, and knowing the extremes of human emotion, or human capability.

Music needs to have more variety than pleasantries and agreeableness. Are there worse words that people have used? Or rather, words that you like better to describe your music?

It's problematic for me because I'm talking about two records that I did six years ago now. I've [since] done a lot of production and songwriting for people, and I've scored quite a lot of things—and it's a little disappointing that even if it's something very different to the records that I've made, people somehow still seem to find a way to bring it back to, "Oh, doom-monger Haxan Cloak does this thing." And it's like, "Well, kind of." It's all about frame of reference, isn't it? I find it very difficult to describe my own music. But I certainly wasn't necessarily thinking about depressing or upsetting material when I was writing it, and it definitely doesn't make me feel that way when I listen to it.

What do you think people will take away from hearing your score to Ari Aster's *Midsommar*? We can prime the crowd

here, Bobby. What is so different about what you're doing now from your two albums that you did six years ago?

I mean, the last record I put out I probably wrote when I was 27 or 26, and now I'm 33. I'm in a different place. It's quite a big transformation one goes through at that time of your life; you're figuring out what your place is in the world, and who you want to be, and what you want to say, and where you want to be. I've been lucky in the sense that I've had production work and scoring work, but I've also used this time—while I've been making all this other work—to really investigate what it is as an artist that I want to say and do, and how I want to progress. Thinking about other artists I admire, how if you're a true fan of somebody's music, you want to hear the journey that person's going on, you want to be invited, in a way, to live vicariously through them for the whatever it is, 55 minutes, that you sit and listen to their record.

I think with *Midsommar*, there's a lot the score is saying that I've been interested in saying for quite some time. Ari and I spoke a lot about how it's not really a horror film—it's kind of a very macabre, twisted fairy tale-cum-revenge fantasy, drawing on a lot of influences. I've been obsessive about Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys and—

So was Charles Manson, I hear.

He was, he wrote a Beach Boys song. So a lot of that stuff, a lot of modern composers that I really love, then going back to stuff like Nelson Riddle, Frank Sinatra, and those old Capitol recordings from the '50s and '60s. I'm really obsessed with the dreamy, orchestral sound from that period. These are all things I've loved for such a long time, things I feel like I've really had a chance to use in the vocabulary of *Midsommar*—which I think is pretty radically different to things people would have heard in my solo music.

Staying on vocabulary, what is it that stops you from calling *Midsommar* a horror movie? If it's not a horror movie, what is it instead? It feels perfectly within the tradition of Hammer films and British folk horror.

For sure, but it also harkens back to what we were talking about before, particularly in reference to what I was saying about music that I made in the past, and how I don't think of it as particularly horror-tinged or melancholic. Similarly with *Midsommar*, obviously it has very shocking moments. But then in some senses, so does *Alice in Wonderland*. So does *The Wizard of Oz*. I don't view it as horror. Just because something has a horrific event in it, I don't know if that necessarily defines it as being horror.

With *Midsommar*, Ari does use those devices of horror, but I think what he's doing is much more than that. It's way more *grand* than that. It is almost *Alice in Wonderland*-like, crafting this kind of magical universe these characters from New York get transported to, and it's extremely vivid, and they're all completely displaced. The roots of the story have far more in common with a fairy tale or a Hans Christian Anderson-type thing than a traditional horror film, in my view.

How do you decide who you'd like to collaborate with?

I'm an upfront and emotional person. If I'm going to do a project with somebody, often the way that I like to do things is that I'll invite them over to my house, and we will sit and listen to music together. What turns you on, what music do you like, how does this relate to what you want to say? How does this relate to how you want *me* to be involved? Or I'll play some music I think might resonate with them, have this conversation through music, sit and get to know each other through a day, or however long it takes. I think, at that point, you can assess whether you've got a genuine connection.

As far as producing a record and making music with somebody, I would say that I have a pretty big problem with the way a lot of music gets made these days. In the pop music sphere of things, where one person goes into a room with another person that they've never met and they're expected to have a chunk of solid gold at the end of it. I personally can't function like that. I can't make something that I think is worthy of being made if I'm not emotionally connected to the person, and I'm not emotionally connected to their vision. That's also an additional criteria that I would base things like that on.

When it comes to this project, this particular film and this particular score, what were the first few aspects that grabbed you, seemed worthy, and connected with you emotionally?

I mean, I've got to be honest: it was Ari. I got an email from my agent, he said, "We've got this guy who's asking about you and he's written this film to your music, and he really wants you to score it," and he sent me a link to some of Ari's short films. I watched those, and I thought he was a genius. He reminded me in a big way of Todd Solondz, who I think is a really fantastic filmmaker.

Then... similar kind of story, to be honest. Ari came to my house, we hung out, and immediately we just felt a connection with one another. We ended up sitting in my studio for three or four hours, really nerding out over films that we loved, music we loved, playing each other things, looking at stuff. There was talk—we talked about *Midsommar*, and then we also talked about everything else in our lives that made us tick, and what films I loved as a kid, and what films he loved as a kid, and how that led to him saying what he wanted to say, and how that led to me making records that I've made. Honestly, it came from a really deep connection with Ari, and just really believing in his vision. Also believing we were mutually aligned with how it was going to be executed and what we wanted to say. And honestly, I don't think I could have met anybody more perfect to score a film with than Ari.

Only working with people who totally would have sat alone with you at the lunch table in 10th grade. "Hey. Come over and smell my record collection. Then I will go to your house, and it will be really neat." Which of those reference points helped you shape what this world sounded like?

Credit to Ari. He showed me a film called *Black Narcissus*, and that was a really fantastic starting point. Not only is the film magical—it has this *Sound of Music*-ish vivid color to it—but also the way the score is used, all the choral elements, and how it's also very pastoral. We talked a lot about not only fantasy, but absurdity, and how *Midsommar* is a completely absurd film. The concept of it is absurd, the place itself, the people are absurd. We talked a lot about *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, and the way Michael Nyman's score for that film was incredible because it's quite brash and not afraid to go to the same level as the storytelling and imagery. Ari would consistently say, "It needs to be bold. And it needs to be beautiful. And it needs to have mystery. But it also needs to have a lot of love in there. It needs to have emotion."

Then there's also the music within the film that the actors play and sing, I wrote a lot of that music as well. So there was a lot of research into old Scandinavian, Nordic, and Icelandic music and instruments. But, I spent a lot of time in Sweden when I was younger so I knew what *Midsommar* was about. I knew what the landscape was.

You have periods of deep research but when it comes to actually executing a project, you also find you have this library of experiences to draw upon. It might be that also sparks a relationship between two things that you wouldn't have thought about before. You may have two things stockpiled that you never thought would cross-pollinate, but they do, and then that becomes a really magical feeling.

OK, so here's this landscape and this director who you just vibe with. And he says it's got to be bold and beautiful. It's got to have love... spoken like a dude who does not play music. What does that mean? What instrument plays love? You are a channel, effectively, because you take a director who says, "I need it to be big and bold and full of love," and you're looking at a field in Sweden, and then you have to determine the Ableton preset. On this deeply literal level, how do you combine image and sound? How do you personally decide what an object or an image is supposed to sound like?

When you have an image, and especially when you have an image as expertly crafted as the ones that Ari gives you—which is a complete gift but also somewhat intimidating to an extent, because it's so good—when you're looking at something like that and you're playing along with it, it becomes patently obvious when something is marrying because, it's just a feeling. The hairs on your neck stand up. You want to get to a point where you feel like, "Okay. This sound is now inextricable from this image that I'm watching." If it means looking at the same 10 seconds for five hours until you come upon something, a chord or two notes or whatever is undeniably entwined with what's happening on the screen, then that's what it is. It's really hard to describe how you arrive at that moment, but I think all I can really say is, it's just so obvious when the two things are working in synergy,

together.

Another thing is that Ari and I, we talked every single day for a very long time. We would text, or we would email, or sometimes we would speak on the phone, but he was in New York and I was here. It became very clear that was a redundant form of communication, really, for what we needed to express and what we wanted to say, so Ari came to my house and stayed in LA for a week. We would work in my studio together for seven or eight hours a day, we would sit and watch the film, and we would move past it. I would sit at the piano or whatever, and play. Then, from the series of emotions I described previously, then if you double that with actually having somebody else in the room, also the person who has created this story that you're trying to help tell, it becomes doubly obvious when the air changes in the room, and something's really working.

You're also marrying those two personalities. It's the force behind the image and the sound coming together in an attempt to create placeholders for the relationship the two of you have developed, for the audience on screen.

Exactly. The thing one has to get to grips with through scoring is, you have to shed all or any ego that you might have. Because it's really not about you, and it's not about anything you think is cool, or any kind of neat trick that you want to try out. It's about, what is the core emotion of this scene? What is it that we're trying to say? And how do I boil down all these ideas into a core that really expresses that? And if that's one note, then it's one note. And if you want to do something more fancy than that, and it doesn't work, then you have to swallow it up and throw it in the trash, because that's just how it is.

What percentage of your personal work would you say ends up in the trash there with the rest of it?

I am a very harsh critic of myself. We had a long period of time before *Midsommar* was filmed where I was working on textures and ideas for what it might be. I think that was that thing—it was me trying to impart myself on what I *thought* the music should be, what I *wanted* it to be. Then when I started getting the dailies, it was obvious that wasn't it and it all had to be thrown away. And that's fine, because at the end of the day, it can't be about you. It has to be serving its other purpose. I think it's healthy to throw things away. In this day and age, we have the opportunity to fart and to put it out, and somebody will listen to it.

It's not conducive to *anything* to be like that. I'm all for prolific artists. I think some of the artists that I respect the most are incredibly prolific, but I also think it's extremely obvious when somebody is a good self-editor, somebody who can step out and see themselves in the third-person, who's self-reflective. I think that's where the best art comes from, when people are able to really assess *why* they're doing something.

I will say that as somebody who has previously very much enjoyed making and releasing music, and then had a kind of hiatus from that for quite some time, making the score to *Midsommar*, and it being released on vinyl, CD, digital and everything, having that *and* having it also be a project where I feel like it's a true statement of where I am and who I am as a musician, I think it's actually kind of blown the flood gates open for me, in terms of perhaps realizing that I was a little bit reticent or fearful to step back into the game again and believe in something.

I had all these ideas that I perhaps didn't quite know how to make perfect sense of—and by no means am I saying that I've accomplished that—but stepping outside and looking at the situation, I have a piece of work now that I'm exceptionally proud of, that is coming out into the world, that is only the tip of an iceberg of ideas that I want to get going with. All it is going to do now is inspire me to finish up a new record, and to be really excited about this idea of having some solidity in knowing who I am, and what I want to say—and trying to say that through another record.

Recommended:

The Haxan Cloak - [Excavation](#)

Bobby Krlic - [Midsommar](#) Original Score

FIVE THINGS recommended for fans of Folk Horror

Weird Walk Fanzine
Folk Horror Revival
#FolkloreThursday
Corinne Boyer
Revelore Press

Name

Bobby Krlic

Vocation

Musician, producer, composer

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