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On refining an idea over a lifetime

Musician Dylan Carlson on early influences, starting the band Earth, refining his creative process over time, and the trance-inducing power of drone.

How old were you when you started playing guitar?

Well, I wanted to start playing at about age 11, but I didn't actually get a guitar until I was 15. I had a friend in high school who was a big prog head—he was super into Yes—and he showed me my first chords. You know, the basics: E, A, D, G, and I was off and running. Then my mom bought me a book on the blues for my birthday the year I got the guitar.

What sparked your interest in playing guitar to begin with?

I grew up listening to a lot of music because of my parents. I was born in 1968—obviously a product of the summer of love. [Laughs] My mom was actually eight months pregnant and saw the Dead in Seattle in February, and I was born the next month. I guess my first Dead show was pre-birth.

I grew up listening to a lot of, I guess you'd say classic rock now—The Band and stuff like that. When I was five we got some Allman Brothers records as part of an Easter egg hunt. But when I could buy my own records, my first one was *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* by AC/DC, and that was the band that started it all, really. From that point on, all I wanted to do was play rock and roll. It took a few years before I started to realize, "Oh, this is something I could actually do."

In that period of time, I got really into the band X. I was also into metal, or I guess what was called metal then—now I guess it's just hard rock. I was into AC/DC and Sabbath, and Priest and UFO, and that kind of stuff. But then I also got into some other stuff that was less mainstream. I mean, the first guitar I bought was a Gretsch, because Malcolm Young played one and Billy Zoom played one. Back then they were just guitars and were cheap—now they're "vintage" and I probably couldn't afford one. [Laughs]

Did you ever take any guitar lessons?

No, I didn't. I have not taken any since, either. I've been pretty much self taught the whole way. It seems like a lot of people do that with guitar. I briefly enrolled in a jazz harmony class at a community college in Seattle, but I left after the first semester, which I kind of regret 'cause I actually enjoyed that class. I mean, it was piano-based, but I do sometimes wish I had done that.

You didn't bother to learn other people's songs—you started writing your own immediately. Why do you think that was?

I guess 'cause I immediately wanted to do a band, and viewed it as a vehicle for doing my own thing. From the get-go I was like, "I want to do this," you know what I mean? I don't want it to be a hobby; I don't want to play at birthday parties or impress my friends. And it seemed like if you wanted to pursue it, you just had to do it as an original act, or with original material.

What was the initial inspiration behind Earth?

Well, it was my third go around at doing a band. I definitely had a lot of strong conceptual ideas about what I wanted to do. Obviously, I was into metal. But my mom has always had great taste in music, and she was big into The Velvet Underground when she was young, so I got exposed to them quite early. Through them, that's how I learned about La Monte Young and Terry Riley and the minimalists.

I was also super duper into King Crimson—the sort of classic years, '69 to '75—and the Fripp & Eno records. I mean, so much so that when Earth first started, I used to sit down to play [like Robert Fripp]. And obviously the long song titles, that kind of stuff. When Earth originally started, I actually played behind my amplifiers. It helped with the feedback, but then the volume and the amps were the show, I guess—since I sat down to play—rather than me parading around the stage.

Where did Earth's sense of repetition come from?

At the time that I started Earth, I would listen to other bands, and they'd play a riff and I'd be like, "Oh, that's a great riff." And then of course they'd change to another riff and then to another riff. The band Rush was a perfect example—some of their riffs are amazing but they never stay on them that long. I was always like, "I wonder what would happen if you just stayed on that riff instead of moving on?" And then Indian music was an influence. And I think maybe there was some sort of bagpipe [influence] going on from the Scottish side of my family.

But yeah, I was always drawn to longer, slower kinds of things. Obviously, the Allman Brothers are quite famous for jamming for long amounts of time. And the Grateful Dead are notorious for long, long jam sessions. I guess that's sort of the weird melting pot that occurred. I joke that I had one good idea and I ran with it.

What specifically about minimalism appealed to you?

I began to explore other music, especially the Gnawa tradition of North Africa and stuff like that—you know, the use of music and various things to induce trance. Music is one of man's first technologies, for lack of a better word—or magic. It's used to communicate and to access altered states. The music that does that is repetitive—trance music.

I remember I went and saw Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the Sufi musician. It must have been like '91 or '92, I think. It was interesting because the audience was... there were a lot of western folks like myself, but then there were a lot of Pakistanis and there was this huge circle of people dancing in trance. Apparently I had gone into a trance during the show because the next thing I knew, I came to and I was in the circle being carried by two guys. They knew right away what to do, and got me out of my seat and into the circle. It was an incredibly powerful experience.

That's interesting because *Earth 2* came out in '93, and to me that record really seems like a very pure distillation of minimalism and trance music. It's just guitar and bass, there's no drums, and it's just three super long drones. Did you feel like you had achieved a certain goal with that record?

Yeah, our first recordings weren't super cohesive. With *Earth 2*, it was very strong conceptually from the outset, like, "Okay, we're going to do this." It was a full statement, I guess you could say. It was also done right at the time when CDs had first come out. At the time, 73 minutes was the limit for a CD. It was like, "We're going to fill this entire CD."

How would you say your creative process has changed since those days?

At the time, I was more into the studio than playing live, and I think that's changed almost 180 degrees. I love playing now. I mean, I love the studio, too, but I definitely feel like live is where the magic happens. We still have albums with a strong conceptual basis, but now I write music much more quickly and spontaneously. The music comes first, and then a lot of the time the concept or any kind of conceptualization will reveal itself later after the music is done.

I also feel like my melodic abilities have improved. To me, melodic arcs and an arc to the song and an arc to the record [are all] important. It's integral to what I do now. I mean, "catchiness" is maybe not the best term since it sounds like I'm talking in a commercial sense. I feel like a great melody or a great riff has a numinous quality and feels like it's always been there—it has a timelessness. That's sort of what I shoot for. I feel like I'm better at achieving that now than in my previous playing.

Do you do anything to get in the mood to start writing, or do you just sit down and go for it?

I used to woodshed a lot, where I would purely practice technique. Nowadays, a lot of the time I'll sit down to do that, and then eventually it seems to turn into songwriting after a while. I'll just be practicing or playing while I'm watching TV or whatever, and then suddenly I'll be like, "Oh, wait a minute—what's that?" And then go off and come up with something.

What do you do about writer's block?

So far I have not had a problem with that, thankfully—and knock on wood. I feel like I'm always writing. Maybe not everything gets used, and I try to be better about recording stuff, like a voice memo [on my phone], when I come up with it. Unfortunately sometimes I don't and it vanishes. But I'm constantly working on stuff. Some of it doesn't get used or later gets rejected for whatever reason, but then sometimes it'll come back later and be reworked. Sometimes I'm like, "Maybe this one's just not ready yet."

There was a long period in which Earth was inactive, from about '97 to 2003. When you came back with the *Hex* album, your guitar style seemed to have evolved quite a bit. What happened during that period?

Well, it's funny... in the four years from '97 to 2001 I was not doing anything musically at all. I didn't even own a guitar. Then I bought a guitar in 2002, just 'cause I wanted to play again, I didn't have any grand scheme to restart Earth or do anything like that. It was just, "Oh, I think I want to play again." I was working at this framing shop at the time. The owner was a drummer, so he would let me and [Earth drummer] Adrienne [Davies] use the warehouse in the back to practice. If I wasn't working, I was practicing guitar like five, six hours a day.

Then one day Randall Dunn and his friend John Schuller came in and were like, "Are you Dylan Carlson?" And I was like, "Well, who wants to know?" And then they were like, "Do you want to do an Earth show?" So we did a show and then it kind of started again from there.

It seems like different influences came into play when you were working on the material that eventually became *Hex*. It didn't sound like what Earth had sounded like previously.

I mentioned the first record I bought was *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*. Well, the next month I got Willie Nelson's *Stardust*. So I had always been into a broad range of music. There were obviously ones I listened to more at certain times than others and whatnot. When I came back to guitar, I had been down and out, I guess you say, in Los Angeles. Maybe that's why the country thing was appealing—the whole Bakersfield sound, the Merle Haggard and Waylon [Jennings] influence or something. When I started playing again, weirdly enough the two things I was most into at the time were Tele players and Sonny Sharrock.

I'd find something that I really liked and then just get sort of mad about it. I'd do like an immersion for six months. So before *Hex* I was listening to a lot of Tele players and learning to do pedal steel stuff on the guitar. I mean, it's funny when people say, "Oh, you do drone music." To me, drone is a technique rather than a genre. It's a technique that you hear in all kinds of music, and I guess technically in music theory it's called oblique motion.

That seems like an important distinction—drone as a technique rather than a genre.

I feel like I've always had this thing where if I learn a technique, I try not to use it until I feel it's integrated into my playing. I don't want to do genre records, you know? I don't want to just be like, "I learned how to do this on guitar, so now I'm going to bust it out and put it in every song." I learn it and when I feel it's a natural part of my playing, then I'll use it.

I always love the sound of an open string going and other notes moving against it. In that sense, the drone is always there. It's just maybe not there in the same way all the time, you know? But if it's there, then it's Earth.

Selected Dylan Carlson:

Earth - *Pentastar: In The Style Of Demons* (1996)

Earth - *Primitive and Deadly* (2014)

Earth - *Earth 2: Special Low Frequency Version* (1993)

Earth - *Hex: Or Printing In The Infernal Method* (2005)

Earth - *The Bees Made Honey In the Lion's Skull* (2008)

Name

Dylan Carlson

Vocation


Musician


Fact




Photo by Holly Carlson

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