

On the value of side projects

Philip Selway (Radiohead) discusses following your collaborator's lead, varying your usual methods, and what you can learn from other people.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2396 words.

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

Many people primarily know you as Radiohead's drummer, but for *Strange Dance*, you don't play drums at all. Why did you go this route?

Overall, that's true. I handed the drumming duties to an incredible drummer named [Valentina Magaletti](#), who I was introduced to through [Marta Salogni](#), who produced the record. I'd originally intended to drum on the record. My initial take was that it would be a record that Carole King and Daphne Oram would've made in this fantasy world, and invited me to drum on it.

I'd done all my preparation for it, but one thing that I really didn't do, coming up toward the sessions, was to spend time drumming. When I got into the studio, I knew the textures I wanted in the drumming, but my mind wasn't in the right place for drumming. I was very much coming from a point of view of the bigger picture on everything, and for drumming, you do need that bigger picture, but you need attention to more details within that as well. And also, drumming is a very physical process, and I wasn't there completely from the get-go physically. So I hastily sacked myself from it.

After the conversation with Marta about those textures I was looking for, she suggested Valentina, and it was spot-on. Valentina came in a couple of days later, and she just breathed this whole new life into the project.

There is some of my drumming on there. There are little snippets of it in the opening track, "Little Things." That's me drumming on there alongside Valentina, and there are other little bits of me throughout the album, but it's not an album about my drumming. It's really liberating being able to stand back from that in some projects.

I've been really lucky throughout all my solo stuff with the drummers I've worked with. They are drummers that I admire enormously. Working up close with them changes the way I've approached my drumming. You can see more possibilities in the instrument.

Can you talk more about how not playing the drums was liberating for you?

Drums as an instrument can sometimes feel a bit loaded for me. I think back to when Radiohead first had any recognition...Up to that point, we'd spent the first five years as a band really not playing beyond ourselves or doing shows. And then, that took us up to just before we were signed, and then we were doing small shows around the U.K., which was good. You become accustomed to the whole thing of performing more.

When "Creep" took off, it suddenly felt as if everything had leapt up enormously. It felt like this weight of expectation in how I should be playing, and I think that's been ticking away in me. I feel like I've certainly risen to the occasion, but there's possibly residual anxiety in me. When I know I've got the time and the space to work with that, I can make it work very well.

While recording *Strange Dance*, I didn't feel I had that. To not have to think about that anxiety was extremely liberating. So was being able to respond to somebody else's playing and ideas, and to then find that very inspiring. That then informs how you approach the other instruments on the record, and having that bed there for all the other musicians to come into and respond to as well. That was a very energizing process, and that's how it's liberating.

What else will you take away from having mostly taken a back seat on drums? What will you take from that into future musical projects?

I've been incredibly fortunate on this project to work with some of my favorite musicians. There's Adrian Utley [of Portishead], there's Quinta who I've worked with a lot, Laura Moody who did all the string and brass arrangements, who I've done a lot of soundtrack work with. And Hannah Peel, Valentina, all of these musicians who I admire enormously. I've gotten to watch them work up close and see how they generate their ideas, how they get themselves in a very creative space. There's a relaxed approach to what they do, and that's really inspiring to see up close. There's a generosity in what they do as well. I take that with me into other projects.

I was doing drums for another band last summer and into the autumn. My sessions for *Strange Dance* definitely informed how I approached the drumming, the actual sessions, the session management, and just trying to build up that momentum in the playing and in generating ideas quickly. If it doesn't work, it doesn't matter, you move on to the next idea.

Can you talk about how broadening the number of instruments you write on and play has shaped your creative process?

I started playing guitar, singing, and drumming. That's where I started off in music. When Radiohead happened, I realized I needed to concentrate on drumming for a period, but the other things were still going on in the background.

What playing multiple instruments brings to me in an overall creative sense...the driving force for me is the song, whether you like the overall arrangement, and how, in the case of Radiohead, the drums can serve what's going on elsewhere. Whatever I play, I'm always trying to find some kind of hook in the parts I'm writing. It's about how those hooks can flow into this bigger work and inform that.

It's always good to have an idea of the different demands each instrument can bring to an ensemble. I found it very interesting going out to play live and being up at the front of the stage and getting an insight into that dynamic. Even though that side of things is on a much more modest scale than, say, a Radiohead show, it increases my admiration for what Thom [Yorke] achieves in that frontperson role.

When I've been doing my soundtrack work, and I get deeper into those overall arrangements, looking at string arrangements and everything, and I understand what goes into that, and just that whole process of songwriting, that perseverance you need in songwriting, you have those unselfconscious moments of, hopefully, inspiration. But then it is a lot of craft after that, and having that sense of how all the different instruments can play into it, how I can express myself on those instruments and everything, it gives you that really good overview and understanding of what makes a larger ensemble tick.

How does your creative process differ when you're with a band versus when you're creating music that's just a Philip Selway project?

Working in Radiohead or other bands where I'm drumming, there's a lot more to respond to. It's like working on a soundtrack for a film. There is something that you immediately respond to. It almost lights up the empathy side of your brain. And you're starting from something very solid to work with. When I'm drumming on other people's projects, this allows me to focus more on the details of drumming and to really work those parts.

Working in a purely solo context, with *Strange Dance*, I was working on my own for quite a long time leading up to

the record, shaping the songs, making sure they stood up in their own right just as a piano and vocal, or guitar and vocal, piece, that I felt that they had harmonic interest in there, that the melodies landed. I love that process. I love being immersed in that process. It's all coming from you, which is great. That's why I want to be a songwriter or do other forms of composition.

Making *Strange Dance*, it was brilliant to go into the studio and invite all these incredible musical voices and say, "This is the template of what I've got. It's just a starting point. Nothing necessarily has to stay there." Opening up that musical forum and seeing what everybody brought into it or what they were responding to in the material that I'd written was very energizing.

When working on other people's projects, you aren't necessarily the originator, and so you're responding. With the solo stuff, you are the initial generator of the ideas, but you get all this wonderful music coming back at you from your collaborators. And so, again, you respond to that. Going into recording [*Strange Dance*], I didn't have fully formed lyrics. I had the odd line here, I had titles, but the lyrics very much were shaped by a response to what was going on musically.

I was also working with an artist who's based in Bristol here in the U.K. called Stewart Geddes, who's an abstract expressionist painter. We were working alongside each other as I was writing, and he was in the studio, so this very natural working relationship came out of that. It felt like a natural progression to say, "Well, Stewart, would you be interested in doing the artwork for the record?" Seeing how he was responding to the music, where he was taking it as the music developed.

I felt what he was doing in his painting was very much like the language of music. I look at his paintings and it's almost, if I could do some kind of visual representation of how emotions look, that would be it. I hope that's what I can do in music as well. All of those elements then fed into the tone of the lyrics. It was collaborative in that way.

At the heart of any good piece, I think there's always that element of collaboration. If you allow full rein to everybody's artistic, musical voice, you stand a very good chance of having a lot of surprises in what's being produced. Something then has the chance to become greater than the sum of its parts.

How do you know when it's time to find new collaborators, and how do you realize when somebody will become a recurring collaborator?

I think there are some very natural logistical things that determine that, according to who is available at any particular point. But if you take somebody like Quinta, all my solo work, she's been present from the early days, and we've worked together on a lot of different projects. It's that kind of relationship that you build up. That's opened doors to working with dancers, working with other musicians. I think you find these groups of musicians that bounce off each other in a really inspiring way.

With Quinta, one of the pieces we worked on was a piece for dance for the Rambert Dance Company. They'd been given the license to reinterpret some of Merce Cunningham's choreography, recontextualize it. We did the soundtrack for that, originally with Adem [Ilhan] collaborating on that.

The piece rolled out over five years, and we would come back and revisit it with slightly different people from time to time according to who was available. There was this final incarnation. It was Quinta, myself, Adrian Utley, and Chris Vatalaro, drummer and percussionist. You look at that and just think there's a musical communication in there, there's a scope to the soundscape and a versatility in there.

It all feels as though it's pulling in the same direction. I was looking at that thinking, "That could be a great dynamic to have at the heart of the record." And then, other relationships I've built up over this past decade, working with Laura Moody, The Elysian Quartet. And Laura, an incredible cellist, has such a distinctive take on arrangement. There's something that sparked in the music between her arrangements, and I felt it brought something out in my work.

So you build up these relationships over time. And I guess for me, going into *Strange Dance*, I was trying to pull all those different elements from people that I'd thought I'd really love to work with. They really inform how I think musically. Hannah Peel, again, somebody whose music over the past few years has had quite an impact on me, agreed to come and play on the record. So, you build up these relationships, you build up that trust. That's where I come from anyway. You look at Radiohead, that's a band that's been going since 1985. It takes time to build that kind of musical understanding, and when you give something that time, you reap the benefits. It pays dividends.

But then you get an instance like with Valentina, where she came into the project at very short notice, but suddenly, it put everything into technicolor. You have moments of serendipity, but building up those long-term musical relationships, that's where your musical voice grows.

All of us in Radiohead, we've all been doing stuff outside the band, and that's very important as well. It doesn't invalidate what we've done together or what we might do together again. You just need to bring those other musical voices in at periods throughout your musical trajectory.

Philip Selway Recommends:

Luckenbooth - Jenni Fagan. In my opinion, one of the most singular and powerful writers in the UK right now. I became immersed in this book when I was writing the lyrics for *Strange Dance*.

The Unfolding - Hannah Peel and The Paraorchestra. Hannah's music informed a lot of my musical thinking on *Strange Dance*. She also played on the record.

Infra - dance piece choreographed by Wayne Macgregor, with score from Max Richter. This piece had a big impact on me when I first saw it. Working with dance has been a prominent feature in my work this past decade. Max Richter's beautiful score also informed aspects of my approach to soundtrack work.

Bryter Layter - Nick Drake. Nick Drake's songwriting and voice have been an enormous influence on me.

Olga Albizu's painting for the cover of *Getz/Gilberto*. The paintings that make up the artwork for *Strange Dance* were made by the abstract expressionist painter Stewart Geddes alongside the making of the album. Olga Albizu's work and this cover in particular were our jumping off point.

Name

Philip Selway

Vocation

musician

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