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As told to Sammy Maine, 2911 words.

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

On allowing yourself to be bored

Ryan Lott and Rafiq Bhatia of Son Lux discuss the power of working on multiple projects at once, staying open to the chemistry of collaboration, and trusting your gut.

You've been working as a group for close to a decade now. What makes you successful collaborators?

Rafiq: A lot of it has to do with trust and there's an extent to which you have to be comfortable with letting go. When we started working together I was always struck by Ryan's ability to jettison a detailed idea about what he might want, about what shape he might want the music to take if something else came along that he was even more excited about. It was so seamless for us to really start to become an entity together and grow together because it's a childlike enthusiasm for a sense of discovery that can be really hard to hold onto.

If you're ever fortunate enough to do something that moves folks, they have a tendency to ask that of you again and again. And it can be difficult, not just because of external pressure, but also because it's easier to retrace your steps than it is to turn left and take the path unknown. That's been one of the things that's felt the most fruitful to me about being a part of this collaboration. We only feel there's more ground that remains unexplored than ever before.

Ryan: I think that fluidity and flexibility is a key to a good collaboration because it means you're open to what the chemistry of the collaboration yields, as opposed to just what your idea that you bring yields. As you listen, your ideas are going to change and the conversation's going to flow in its own direction based on that chemistry. It lets you stay open to a path that is undiscovered. Even if you're yielding your own preference, you know that you're yielding it to something that is full of integrity because you have trust for the creative instincts, and you have respect for the creative instincts of the other.

What would you say your time with Son Lux brings to your solo projects?

Rafiq: It's resulted in a constant out flux of energy from what we do together into these worlds that we all individually inhabit and the collaborations that originate in those worlds. A lot of that energy funnels back into what we do together, and also those relationships and the people that we meet in our travels outside of the band end up coming back into the fold of what we do together. It really feels like there's room for cultivating family around what we do together creatively. It's important to note that, even before Ian and I were part of the Son Lux project, it was always something that Ryan did with an extended family of collaborators. All three of us have viewed music not as a thing that gets made in a vacuum, but as something that is the result of community. It's a lens away from the industry based commercially driven view of music as these things that fit into narrow boxes for consumption. It's treating music more as something that's the result of human ideas and relationships.

You all seem to be working on different projects all the time. Do you have a way that you prioritize specific creative projects?

Ryan: One of the things that I've found key to my creative practice is having a number of things in play at any given time. It allows me to maintain a steady creative pace, oscillating between different things and when the energy for one wanes, it usually waxes for another. It's also been good insulation against writer's block, because personally, I definitely have writer's block all the time. I'll come to a halt or a fork in the road, and I'm not sure where to go creatively. And that's fine because I can find the solution off the clock on that job. I can shift gears and look to other projects for both inspiration and to get the juices flowing again. I also found that some of my favorite breakthroughs happen while sorting out something on another project. Our musical tools and also our relationships that we get to enjoy

creatively are so exciting, they're like fuel themselves. Going from one to the next and discovering in each, not only a path forward in each respective thing, but a lot of times, you discover a path forward over there. So next time you circle back around, boom, you've got something to work with.

Has your creative process evolved after working on multiple projects over the years?

Rafiq: The term creative process, for me, is a bit of a misnomer in that it's more of an orientation than it is a process, in that the steps that I might take may vary wildly from situation to situation, or project to project. But there are certain bigger picture principles that I've started to identify in myself more.

One that I've been thinking about a lot lately is coming to terms with the importance of boredom in originating creative ideas for me. I draw a great deal of inspiration, or momentum, or energy from a deadline once I'm underway with a creative idea and I'm starting to push against it and figure out what the contours of the thing are. I've noticed, over time, that some of my best ideas, or the ideas that have pushed me into new territory, have come from a place of my brain just being like jello, from almost a plasticity of the mind kind of state, which really only happens when I clear it of other things.

As somebody who came from an upbringing where working hard was a very important ethic, it can be difficult for me to square the undeniable productive benefits of clearing my mind with what that looks in practice—that I essentially seem like I'm not doing anything for a little while to anyone, including myself. The irony of it is that it's more productive for me, in a lot of cases, to put it down, go for a walk, lay on the couch for 10 minutes, and then go back to doing it, than it is for me to try to "power through." Even from a purely capitalistic productivity based mindset, it would be a better choice. It's coming to terms with this idea of myself as a person that's allowed to experience the world outside of a framework of just producing.

You recently worked on the score for *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Like the movie it contains all these multitudes of humor, and sadness, and optimism, and chaos, and sincerity. How did you even begin to start that project?

Ryan: We were staring down such an enormous task. It's like when your house is a total wreck, right? It's really hard to start cleaning. When you're surrounded by all the kids' toys, and the laundry, and the dogs, it just gets so overwhelming. One of the ways we were able to accomplish this is that Daniels were our captains, and they directed us. So rather than getting overwhelmed by this enormous task, they bit off pieces for us to chew on, and led us.

Rafiq: That ended up making this literal multiverse of ideas that we had to trace and reinforce the contours of. It helped make manageable sections out of it and allow us to begin the process by drawing our focus into one world. Did that world happen to be the hot dog hands soap opera musical right out the gate as the first assignment? Maybe. But still, it allowed us to take what was a seemingly impossible task, and reduce it down to a little allegory for the whole project, which was like, "How can we inhabit each of these universes and be able to generate sound material and sound texture, and also musical themes and ideas that would represent that world quickly enough, that even through a barrage of universe changes and quick cuts, you could still distinguish one world from another?"

Ryan: Earlier we talked about trust and one of the things that made this such an incredibly enjoyable project for us was that we had Daniels' trust. There was no way any of this was going to get done with the sort of fervor and vibrancy if all parties weren't really invested in the other. Feeling both their strong directorial presence, and their unshakeable trust in us was a powerful mix. I think they had more faith in us than we had in ourselves at first.

Rafiq: They could imagine us doing things that we could not yet imagine ourselves doing.

How do you stay engaged with a project like this, that maybe takes longer than you expect?

Ryan: At the time, they had been already developing the story for years. However, the script wasn't done, wasn't cast, nothing was shot, which is a rare privilege for a film composer to be involved before there's even a cast. That was partly because Daniels knew that the music would be not only essential but they knew there would be more music in the film than in your average feature film. They needed to know whether it was going to be possible to solve that part of the creative puzzle.

The original plan went out the window with COVID. The production was shut down a day before they were done shooting but rather than just being on standby, that really gave us the latitude to explore the musical potential in all these different worlds more deeply than we otherwise would have. It also meant that we could do other things at the same time.

We made three records. *Tomorrows I*, *II*, and *III*. I was talking about earlier about how one thing can propel you into the next, as opposed to having one project that you have to focus on, and if you are not productive on that project, you feel like you haven't accomplished anything—we were able to avoid that pressure, even though we had just this enormous amount of work to do. We were able to just keep flowing.

As we were developing ideas for the score, those things could fuel our creative energies for the *Tomorrows* records and vice versa. We could also each take our own chunk of musical responsibilities from the score and just really dig into those, knowing that we had the others to fall back on for both their creative insight and their performance or production contributions. We were moving in multiple directions at once.

And again, with the oversight of Daniels and their really beautiful and powerful insights, they never led us astray. One of the hardest things to do is to not go astray and not follow down rabbit holes. They kept us from doing that.

Rafiq: A common thing is when somebody's looking for the words and so they use ones that aren't quite right in order to just be able to communicate. Daniels really restrained their specifications to what they knew to be the case about what they were looking for. They would err on the side of ambiguity. It erred on the side of giving us more freedom and placing more trust in us to find the thing. They also knew that they weren't going to sign off on it until they heard what they were looking for.

What were the biggest lessons you learned from making this particular project?

Ryan: There's one little moment in the movie where one rock says to another, "There are no rules!" It captures a sentiment, which I believe very strongly now in the wake of this film, which is that there are no rules for what is possible. I had found myself in a neat frame and in many ways, I am content to live inside that and let that frame define me and define what my image is. Something that's really resonant for me in this story is that Evelyn discovers a multiplicity of reality and possibility and potential and power in many versions of herself and that her path isn't as prescriptive as she thought it needed to be. I want to carry that with me and I want to be careful not to limit what potential I see for my life based on my limited view of it right now. I want to have more of that broad imagination that Daniels had for us and for this story and for Evelyn. I want to have that as well. I want to take that into my life, remind myself of it, teach it to my kid.

Rafiq: I feel like there's a relationship between this question and the one that you had asked earlier, which is how do you deal with a project that has gone longer than you expected? There are trade-offs every time you extend a deadline. I remember reading an interview with the rapper GoldLink and he was talking about a conversation that he had with Rick Rubin, where Rick Rubin said: "If you spend eight years working on your second album, that's not your second album, it's your eighth album." The implication that he drew from that was that there is enough that comes from being on the finishing end of a process that you start to develop the ability to make things. If you had been producing at a faster rate during that time, you would experience more growth, you'd travel down more avenues. There are a lot of reasons why not lingering on something and knowing when it's time to hang up the hat can be really important. But at the same time, there is something so indescribably rewarding about seeing a creative idea in which you have a conviction in the integrity through to a version of itself that upholds the integrity of the vision.

In situations where I'm well past when the clock was supposed to expire on a project, I find myself thinking about Dawn of Midi and their record *Dysnomia*. They spent years making a version of that album that they never put out because when they were on their way to master it, they realized, "You know what? This could be a lot better than it is right now." They did all the things on paper that they were "supposed to do" and still had the discipline to say "not done yet." They worked at a furious clip after that, but it still took them years to make the version that upheld the integrity of the idea. They did that while essentially toiling into obscurity: they weren't playing any shows, nothing was happening, the momentum from their last projects was dissipating but the three of them knew that they had a really good idea and that was enough to carry them into making something that really, for me, changed the game. It's being able to look at all of the reasons why you should stop and say, "I want to spend my time with this thing. I want to be able to do this thing and see it through to being the best version of itself that it can be." I think it's always easier in situations where you're way past where you intended to be in terms of the clock, to be able to look at the idea and say, "Well, are we way past where this can go creatively?" And if the answer is no, then there's more work to be done.

Son Lux recommends:

We've had the honor of sharing the stage with a series of artists, each of whom inspired us in unique ways:

Emily Wells' show was both intimate and big; personal and communal, with a metabolic quality that nourished us into the next day. Go catch her headlining tour around North America and please listen to her latest album *Regards To The End*.

With their live sets, Nappy Nina & Stas Thee Boss managed to communicate the warm glow of something fiery viewed from afar, while still hitting in a way that's immediate and undeniable. We hope you'll familiarize yourself with both of their discographies and stay up on their next steps as we plan to.

You'd be hard pressed to find a vocalist who can reach out the way that Kiah Victoria does. Even in the most airy, abstracted moments, her voice still cut through the space like a beacon, roping each of us tightly and reining us into a place of deep connection. Check the string of singles she's been teasing out the past couple years and prepare yourself for what is to come.

Over the course of five nights with us, Black Taffy conjured dreamlike worlds of sound, weaving gossamer webs of harp and strings around pillars of booming bass. We keep spinning his dark and alluring LPs, *Elder Mantis* and *Opal Wand*, and look forward to hearing the recorded manifestation of the material he was teasing live.

For our final show, we had the pleasure of having Sen Morimoto and his band set the stage for us in their hometown of Chicago. Sen's music relaxedly conveys a personal, honest quality that imparts the open arms of community. We recommend a deep dive into the label he runs with NNAMDI and Glenn Curran, *Sooper*

Records.

Name

Son Lux

Vocation

musicians and producers

Fact

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