TAPE OP

AARON DESSNER
The National, Taylor Swift, Sharon Van Etten

RICKY REED
Lizzo, Jason Derulo, The Weeknd

FILM & TV SCORING w/ LYLE WORKMAN
Get Him to the Greek, Good Boys

CHARLIE CLOUSER
Nine Inch Nails, Saw, Resident Evil

ETHAN GRUSKA
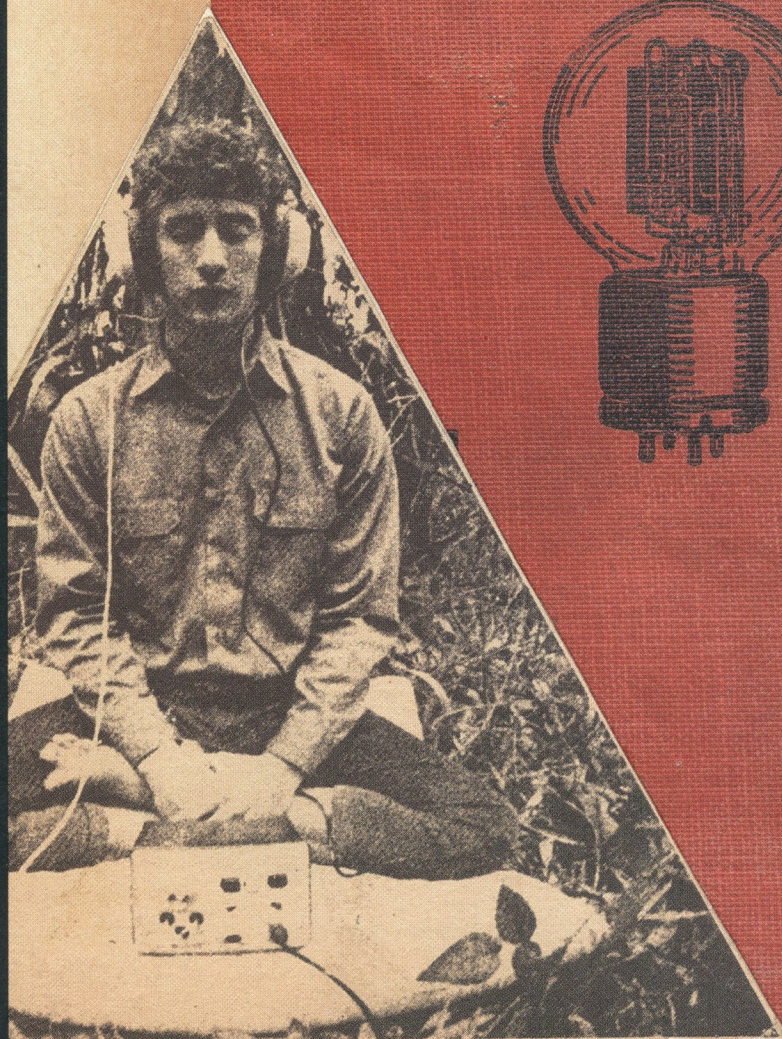*The Belle Brigade, Phoebe Bridgers, solo*

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FROM TOURING & RECORDING TO FILM SCORING:
CHARLIE CLOUSER & LYLE WORKMAN TALK TRANSITIONS

Last fall, I had the pleasure of meeting up and chatting with two successful Hollywood film composers, each in their respective home studios. Interestingly, what they both have in common is years of touring and recording with various bands before they ended up in current careers. Read on to find out more about their different approaches to composing music for films and television. -JB

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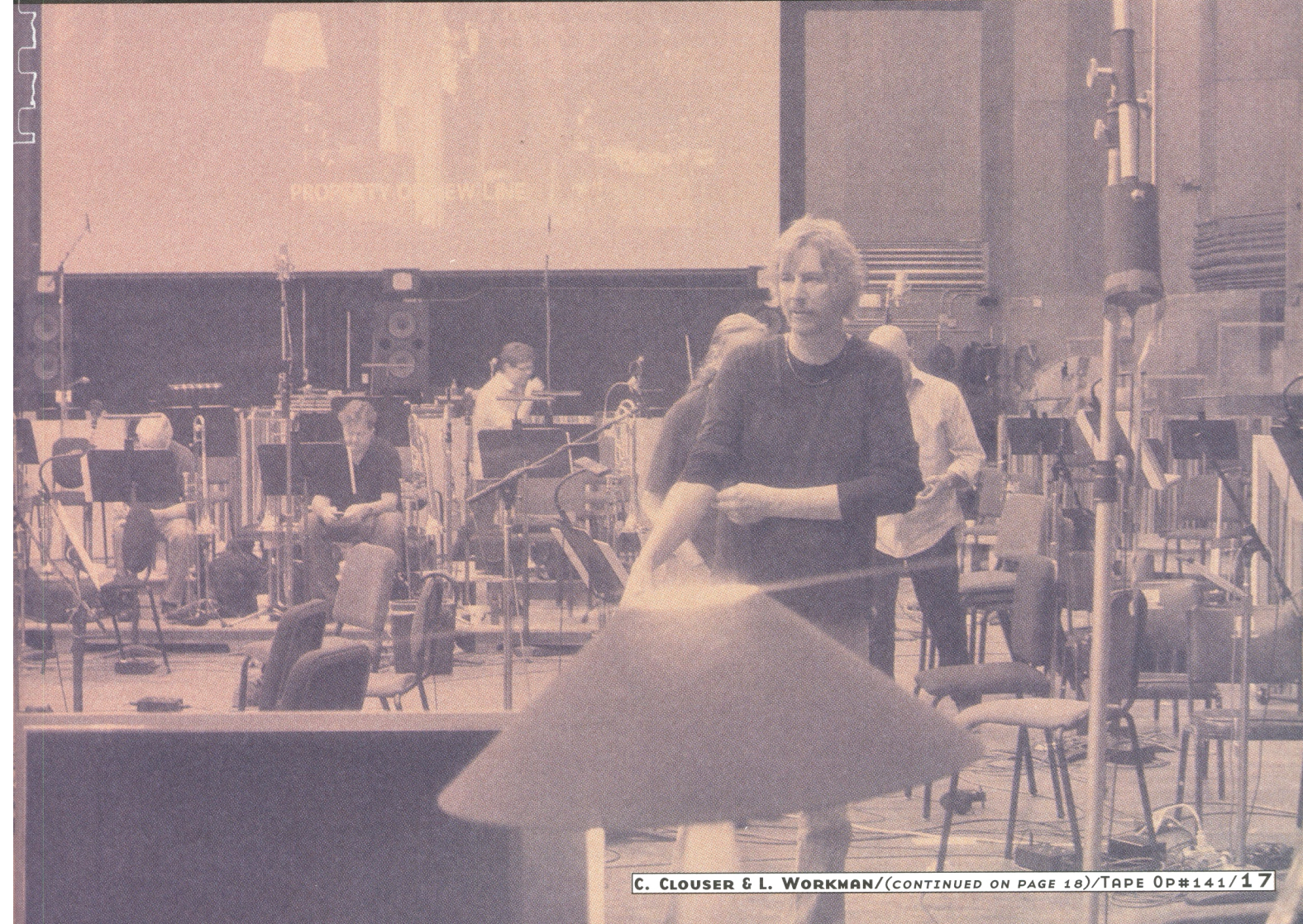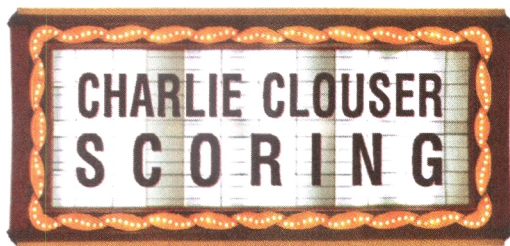Negative

16mm Color
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SOUND
MASTER

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SOUND

Left: Charlie Clouser in his Topanga Canyon home studio.
photo by Zoe Wiseman
Below: Lyle Workman with Shawn Murphy.
Bottom: Tracking for *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone*
at Warner Bros. Eastwood scoring stage in Burbank.
both photos by Timathea Workman

CHARLIE CLOUSER SCORING

interview by John Baccigaluppi

As a Nine Inch Nails fan, Charlie Clouser's name has been familiar to me since the mid '90s, but as time went by I began to notice his name pop up in credits for movies and television shows as well. It turns out that our own Marsha Vdovin is pals with Charlie, and the last time I was in Los Angeles she arranged a meetup for us in his Topanga Canyon studio. We sat down, and I got the story on how Charlie went from being a full time Nine Inch Nails member to an in-demand film (the *Saw* franchise, *Resident Evil: Extinction*) and television (*American Horror Story, Wayward Pines, Numb3rs*) composer.

Are you a Los Angeles native?

No, I'm from a dirt road in Vermont. But I grew up watching *CHiPs* and *The Brady Bunch*, so I was indoctrinated by pop culture, and pre-programmed to come to Los Angeles. I love it. I have a high degree of anonymity. I'm out here in the sticks, outside of town a little bit, but I have access to all the resources, the studios, technical services, musicians, and everything else that I could need. It's a good fit for me. I originally moved here in '92, when I was 27. The television composer I had worked for in New York was moving to L.A. to do other projects and said, "Come on out." I worked for him for a little while, bounced off the walls, and drove around town with my [Akai] MPC60 in the trunk of my car doing drum programming for $35 an hour. Then I was brought into Trent Reznor's world, and we were off and running.

You were already in the television and film world a bit before you came out here?

I was lucky. I only ever had one real job, which was working at the Sam Ash store on 48th Street in Manhattan, back when 48th Street was the mecca of music stores. One of my customers there was an Australian guy [Cameron Allan] who was a film and TV composer, and a record producer. He'd come over every six months or so to buy a couple of toys to take back with him to Australia. At one point he came to NYC and said, "I'm here to stay! I have to set up this studio and score this television series. I need more arms in the studio." He had brought one friend with him who was going to play piano and do the string melodies, but he hired me to do all the sound design and drum programming – to fulfill that role that I naturally fall into. After we worked in New York together for a couple years, he came out here and brought me along. By the time I got involved with Nine Inch Nails, I'd spent a few years doing film and television soundtracks, and I walked away from it for a while. When I got back into it, about 2003 or so, I wasn't coming into it cold. I

already knew the workflow, the terminology, and what's involved in delivering 42 minutes of score every week for seven months. That was a big advantage.

What was your role with Nine Inch Nails and how did that begin?

By the time I met Trent I would have been 28 or 29 years old. I already had record contracts with bands who'd made a record and then got dropped. I had worked as the programmer for a television/film composer for a few years. I'd also been doing drum programming and synth programming, as well as remixes all over Los Angeles for a bunch of industrial metal records, like Prong and White Zombie. An old college friend was producing a Nine Inch Nails music video and brought me into Trent's world to do sound effects as an overlay on the video. Rather than book into an audio post[-production] house, my friend said, "We should get my friend Charlie over here. He's a whiz on the computers and the samplers. Trent, you've already got a studio. We could do it here!" We allocated two days to do this and then completed it in four hours. We spent the rest of the day playing video games and screwing around, and after that I never left. Trent had finished basic tracking on Marilyn Manson's first album [*Portrait of an American Family*], and he had to get involved in a bunch of other work right away. He didn't like the drum sounds that they had tracked off the floor on that record, so he said, "I need to do drum augmentation. Sample reinforcement. I don't have time to deal with it. You do that sort of thing, right?" I did all the drum augmentation on Manson's record at Trent's studio while he was off doing other projects. He kept coming up with things for me to do, and eventually the previous keyboard player, James Woolley (rest in peace), was reaching the end of his tenure with the band, so I slotted in as the keyboard player in the middle of the touring cycle on the *The Downward Spiral* album. I'd been involved a little bit in the very final stages of *The Downward Spiral* [sessions], so when they started touring for that album I went on the road with the band, setting up a transportable studio in hotel rooms and working where we could, when we could, in between dates. Eventually, they forced me to get on stage and play keyboards.

Did you work on the records after that? Was *The Fragile* the last one you were on?

Yeah, that was the last. After the touring cycle from *The Downward Spiral* ended, we moved to New Orleans. Trent bought this gigantic funeral home and converted it into a recording studio with a big SSL [console] from Larrabee North Studios. It was a wonderful facility, with separate programming rooms for each band member, a rehearsal space for the band, and this big SSL studio. That's where we made Marilyn Manson's *Antichrist Superstar* album, as well as a few one-offs and side projects by some other bands that Trent had signed to his label, Nothing Records. We also did a few one-off Nine Inch Nails tracks. Then we settled in to do *The Fragile* album, and we did all of that in New Orleans.

What about the *Natural Born Killers* soundtrack? Was that done there?

That we actually did in hotel rooms on tour. There was no score, per se, on that movie. It was all songs that the amazing music supervisor, Budd Carr, had picked and assembled with [director] Oliver Stone into a complete musical journey that fit the film. Trent contributed new recordings of two songs. One was "Burn," which was a one-off original that we actually recorded in South Beach [Miami, Florida] at the studio in the basement of the Marlin Hotel. Trent also did a version of an older Nine Inch Nails song, "Something I Can Never Have" – we did that in hotel rooms. Trent's idea for the *Natural Born Killers* soundtrack album was to make it a chronological travelogue of the movie. We'd take some of the songs that were used in the movie, as well as the dialogue tracks, and interweave it into one big long piece that resembled the movie – a continuous audio object.

Besides keyboards, it sounds like you did quite a bit of co-production, sound mangling, and manipulating for Nine Inch Nails?

Yeah. I was "the programmer." Trent's always in the driver's seat, but he brought me into the band and convinced me to move to New Orleans on the basis of a lot of the remixes I had done for other heavy artists. He wanted to have that "remix philosophy" in-house so that he could start a piece of music, drop it into my lap, let me mess with it, and send it back to him – as opposed to him squinting at the computer screen all by himself for the entire duration. That's what we wound up doing in New Orleans, where I had my separate studio and we could exchange elements. I'd also come up with rhythm beds, or track ideas, that he could extract from. For example, there's a song on *The Fragile* called "Starfuckers, Inc." He built the song around this drum and bass loop that I made on a drum machine and some fuzz pedals. He said, "I can turn that into something." There was a bit of back and forth, but clearly I was always trying to guess what direction he was going to go in next. I'd try to do work that would complement what he was after. It was a nearly impossible task, but still lots of fun.

I heard that you'd used the early soft synth program Turbosynth a lot? That was way ahead of its time.

Oh, yeah; we were big on that. I always loved software and computer tools as opposed to boutique analog recording techniques. Even though I came up in the pre-MIDI years, and went to audio engineering school – I can calibrate the [Ampex] MM 1000 or build a high-pass filter out of spare resistors and capacitors – that wasn't what interested me. Crazy new tools like Turbosynth and other early software did interest me. Anything that could process audio on a computer, we would jump on. Trent was already deep into that; it wasn't something *I* brought to him. We were kindred spirits, in that regard. In those days it was pre-DAW, pre plug-ins, so that was a little esoteric. Turbosynth was something that allowed us to do unholy things to audio. It was a great tool for getting those cyber guitar textures and ultra-heavy blasts of distortion.

Why did you eventually leave Nine Inch Nails?

By the time I left the band in 2001 I was 38 years old. We had a very brutal eight-year run, with all the rock 'n' roll mayhem that you would imagine. New Orleans was also not a city that felt like home to me. We weren't there because of the roots music scene – we were there to get away from Los Angeles. There were many other things that I wanted to do and couldn't accomplish within this umbrella of Nine Inch Nails and in New Orleans. We were in a lull after the touring cycle for *The Fragile*, and it was unclear what was going to happen next, or when it would happen. I think the single motivating factor was that I had a half-finished record in progress that Page Hamilton, from the band Helmet, and I had been writing together [Helmet's *Size Matters*]. He said, "It's time to make that record! Let's do it." I came out to L.A. to get that underway, and then I never went back. It took a few years for Trent to redirect his energy to the next phase of Nine Inch Nails. The next Nails record came out in 2005. Looking back, I was glad I didn't hang around because I got a lot done in those four years!

You've got the dream job of a lot of musicians. Everyone wants to be able to stay at home, work in their studio, and do cool music for movies and TV! What would you recommend to a younger person trying to get their start in this world?

Oh, the kids these days have it so easy, let me tell you! *[laughs]* I have very limited classical music training. I don't have deep knowledge of orchestration and harmony; what's conventionally taught in conservatory. There are a few good film composition programs, like the one at USC, and folks who go through those programs can get on a pathway to become an intern for one of their visiting professors, who are also successful film composers. Onwards and upwards through the conventional hierarchy of Hollywood film composers. I didn't do that. I came into it at a right angle. But the conventional career track, and the one thing I have in common with those traditionally-educated composers, is that I did work as the right hand man for a guy who was already up and running. My name wasn't on the show; it wasn't even in the credits. It was a cash paycheck every week, and that was it. But my responsibility was also limited, because it was his ass on the line, not mine. That path of being an intern and then an assistant to a working composer is always going to be valid. If a young person coming up can get access to that USC film music program, or some of the other excellent ones, that certainly seems to help. But, from a more philosophical point of view, the one thing that I've always tried to do is to avoid doing what could be easily taught in school. I know that runs counter to what I was saying, but I got a late start. I was a drummer and didn't study harmony – I don't even know blues scales. Because I got a late start in some aspects of it, I didn't want to forever be playing catch-up so I tried to find a path that was untrodden. I tried to avoid doing what could be encapsulated into a semester at school – if a musical style can be reverse-engineered into a set of sample loops and sold for $99 on a website, then I didn't want to do it. I always tried to

avoid styles that could be easily described. That led me to steer away from jobs like epic trailer music, even though the sonics are tempting. Once the vocabulary is well established, there's less fun in it for me; there are already boundaries and ground rules set down. What I wound up doing in my scores is a weird hybrid of my favorite elements of everything from Pink Floyd to György Ligeti. Hopefully it's not an easily-definable style. I'll click around occasionally on YouTube, and there're a million tutorials that can be invaluable for seeing how someone else does it, but I always caution people to not necessarily take that next step and assume that those tutorials are showing you how you *should* do it. That was a long-winded way of saying, "Have your own sound!" The internship and assistant route is not some weird, mysterious thing. There's not a huge barrier to it. Composers who are busy on A-list movies – guys like Tom Holkenborg (aka Junkie XL) – have 10 or 15 people working for him, and he's got them lined up. The single most important skill to get there seems to be personality related; having good communication skills and a friendly, workable attitude. It's not all about being someone they want to hang out and have a beer with, but about being able to communicate, read situations, and to have some element of social graces. That's *the* most valuable skill, in terms of embarking on that path of intern to assistant. The few assistants who I've had have always gotten the job based on personality more than on which plug-ins they know how to use.

Is most of your soundtrack work done in your room here now?

Yeah. Despite my background as a synthesizer guy, and despite the bunches of synthesizers here in the room, I don't use synthesizers all that much. I'd say 95 percent of the sounds on any score that I do are processed acoustic sounds; whether it's me playing drums in the big concrete living room across the yard here, or using a bow on a metal sheet, or using an EBow on a Chinese guzheng. I prefer sounds that have an acoustic, organic footprint. This all goes back to one of the first TV shows I had ever scored myself. There was a cue where I had some tricky, fancy synth programming on it. We were previewing the score for the directors and producers, and one of them said, "Stop, stop! What's that sound? It sounds like R2-D2 there in the background. It's distracting." I realized that not every civilian is going to be wowed by studio trickery and elaborate programming of filter envelopes. We took out that R2-D2 sound and replaced it with a Wurlitzer electric piano part; which, in my earlier life, would have been a crime against the art of pushing boundaries, but in the end it worked much better. That was the beginning of my transition from fancy programming to using sounds that originated in the acoustic world. Whether they're heavily manipulated and time-stretched, pitch-shifted and granulated in the Waldorf Quantum [synthesizer], or some software tool, their original DNA comes from the real world. To my ears that adds a human quality. When I start with sounds that have an organic sonic DNA, I can go even further with the processing and the manipulation before it becomes something that is

distracting to the person watching the movie. There's life and movement that I didn't have to draw into the mod wheel strip chart in my DAW.

The Waldorf Quantum is part of that whole chain?

Yeah. The Quantum can do either live processing of the audio coming into its inputs, or I can also put wav files on SD cards and import them. They can be turned into wavetables, or they can be dealt with as a sample source for a granular engine that slices up the audio into little fragments and then distributes them in a cloud. You can create these wonderful synthetic-ish textures that have no sawtooth waveform in them. The Waldorf Quantum is absolutely bonkers. For the money, it's the king of flexibility and it sounds good all the time compared to the synths that are around today. Obviously there are a lot of amazing synths coming out weekly. The Moog One is a ridiculous triumph of analog engineering, but there's not one in this room because those aren't the type of sounds that I typically use. That's why there're so many guitar pedals here. That's one way I can further manipulate sounds that started in the real world.

You're using [Apple] Logic [Pro X] as your main DAW?

I do most of my work in Logic and do all the programming, composition, and mixing inside it. I print the final mixes to a separate Pro Tools machine. I'm printing stems, and the stems are all in surround. It's a 48-channel pass when I print a mix, so it's bonkers. I can hit play in Logic, and everything comes out of separate outputs in 5.1 groups: drums low in 5.1, drums high in 5.1, metals, keyboards, strings low. Each stem is in 5.1, all being printed simultaneously to a separate Pro Tools machine. Even though I'm mixing the score here, that's not the final mix. It goes to the dubbing stage where the re-recording mixers will integrate that score with sound effects, dialogue, ambiences, and so on. They need to be able to dip the drums a little bit when there are door slams, or boost the strings in one passage to fit better around other sonic elements.

When you bounce between Logic and Pro Tools, is that a digital bounce or an analog bounce?

That's always a digital bounce over MADI. With one $10 cable, I can spray 64 channels from rig A to rig B.

Do you end up going to the soundstage to oversee the final mix?

I often do, but it usually amounts to me sitting on the couch in the far back and eating a lot of those fun-sized Snickers bars that they put out in bowls. At that point my work is done. It never feels right for me to say, "Hey, you shouldn't turn down the drums in this section, because it makes the music sound weak!" There are other factors at play that outweigh *my* suggestions. I should have made the correct decision earlier in the composition process, and not have put drums in that spot in the first place. More and more I tend to stay here in my lab while the dub is going on, because I may get a phone call from the dub that says, "We love the score, but could you put three piano notes right when she looks at the picture of the

Que Lastas
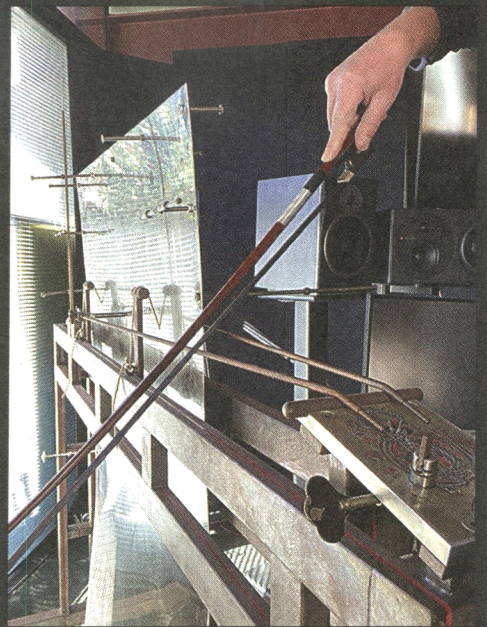
That is a one-of-a-kind device, made by the amazing Chas Smith. It produced many of the signature sounds on my scores for all the films in the *Saw* horror movie franchise. Chas is a talented pedal steel player, sound designer, instrument builder, sculptor, and metal fabricator. He invented and constructed all sorts of unique instruments strictly for his own use on his recordings, often using exotic metal alloys and difficult welding techniques. He's heavily influenced by artists like Harry Bertoia, who was one of the first sound sculptors. Lots of Chas's instruments are very micro-tonal and non-chromatic. Que Lastas uses a pair of low piano strings stretched across a bridge that's anchored to a large metal sheet, so that when the strings are struck or bowed, the sheet vibrates and acts almost like a plate reverb, creating a dark and reverberant sound that is terrifying. You can also bow the edges of the sheet itself, or bow the metal rods that are bolted to the sheet at nodal points. This creates all sorts of higher-pitched tones and textures that are absolutely perfect for horror movies. Chas is understandably a little wary about using his instruments on other people's recordings if there's a chance that samples could be extracted and reused without him knowing about it. It took a little convincing from our mutual friend, Peter Freeman, to get him to agree to let me record some of his instruments on the first *Saw* film. I paid Chas a good chunk of the fee from the score, and then I continued to cut checks to him as each sequel came around and I continued to use his sounds. Que Lastas made a sound that became my go-to whenever something bad was about to happen on screen, and it helped shape the mood of these scores. A couple of years ago he was packing up for a move up north. I got a call from him where he jokingly told me that he might not have room on the truck for a certain instrument that he knew I loved, and I should come over with my checkbook and a pen with plenty of ink to write lots of zeros after the number. That's how I ended up with Que Lastas at my studio. I'd like to think this happened because I was careful not to screw him over by reusing his recordings without paying him, but it also might have been that he didn't have room on that truck. [*laughter*]

dead child?" I can quickly knock out that little overlay, upload the files, and they can drop it in. That way, the work continues without having to reschedule the mix while I re-do the cues. I learned that skill from being on TV shows, where we'd be mixing the show on a Wednesday and it goes to air on a Friday to six million people, so there was zero time for any tomfoolery. I would stay in the lab waiting for any emergency changes that I could make, lickety-split.

The big monitor screen here is where you see the video while working?

Exactly.

You're playing to the picture.

Oh, yeah; always to picture. The technology that we have these days makes the technical concerns so easy to solve, compared to back in the day when we were using a 3/4-inch video deck with the shuttle knob to scroll around through the picture. The crudeness of the technology that we used to have to deal with in the '80s and early '90s, compared to the speed and ease with which we can conjure up a whole simulated orchestra on a laptop or a reasonably-priced computer, is fantastic. The technical issues are not a problem anymore, and the cost is so reasonable. You could walk into the Apple store with five or ten grand, make a stop at Guitar Center with the money left over, and you're up and running.

Where do you track instruments here?

I generally track in this room with headphones if it's solo instruments that need to be in a dry environment, like the guzheng or metal sculptures. Part of the reason I bought this house was that it has this separate building I can use as a studio, but also because the main part of the house is concrete, glass, and steel, as well as very asymmetrical – with 26-foot high ceilings – and drums sound ridiculously good in there. The type of drum sounds that I like are somewhere in between heavy rock drums and epic movie percussion. The trend in cinematic music, led by people like Hans Zimmer and Junkie XL, is to use big, epic taiko drums with cavernous reverb. For the type of music I wind up writing, those sounds don't always read correctly. Especially on the horror movies in the *Saw* franchise; they almost have an industrial music aspect to them where the rhythms are dense and fast, and so these big, cavernous, reverberant taiko drums don't always work. I wind up playing, recording, and sampling most of the drums I do myself in the living room.

Do you have to run back and forth between the buildings?

I have a Cat 5 connection between the house and studio, so I can easily control the studio computers from the live room and pipe audio back and forth using AVB [Audio Video Bridging]. The sound I wind up getting is very thick, dense, and reverberant, but it's not overly long. To use a cliché example, it's more Phil Collins "In the Air Tonight" toms than epic, cinematic, warehouse, or parking garage drums. Most of the time, that's the drums on my scores.

Your wife [Zoe Wiseman] doesn't mind you drumming in the house?

I'm more embarrassed that she would hear me mess up than she is annoyed at having to sit through it. My wife's a photographer, and she has also been known to

make a big mess in the living room with backdrops and models, so it's a symbiotic relationship. We tolerate each other's creative chaos. She's actually slept through a few drum sessions, believe it or not.

It seems like you've done more music for movies than TV recently?

Two of the TV series that I did ran for six years, with 23 episodes a year [a piece]; but one series might only show up as one discography entry online, even though it was 112 episodes, each with 40 minutes of music. In the past 15 years I had about 8,000 individual pieces of music delivered for TV, and about 3,000 pieces for movies. It's a lot. With movie music, I generally have more time and can be elaborate and careful with it. I'm not frantically scrambling to meet a weekly deadline in the same way as TV. When I'm excited about a project, it might not be for the right reasons; it's never the money. For me, it's always about whether it's going to be fun and interesting, and if I'm not going to hate myself for having done it.

I imagine you spend quite a bit more time on film scores?

The shortest amount of time I've ever had to complete a film score is about four weeks, but ideally it's more like eight weeks. Much longer than that, and I start to be in danger of overcooking the rice again. Some people work on projects like that for a year or more, on and off, as they stop and start and intersperse it with other projects. I like to do one thing at a time, devote myself to it, get into it, concentrate on it, and then move on to the next.

Do you see continued income from residuals, royalties, and publishing?

Oh, yeah. And big shout out to Doreen Ringer-Ross at BMI. BMI has been a huge factor in my ability to continue doing this. That is one reason why I don't try to get involved in scoring for video games – there are no performance royalties and no BMI checks coming from video game music. To be fair, the up-front fee for those kinds of jobs can be three times or more what the up-front fee is for scoring an episode for TV or a feature movie, but that's the *only* money that you'll ever see. I've done a couple of video game scores for big titles. They were okay; it was not a terrible experience. At one point, one of the project leads was saying to me, "This seems like it would be a dream project for a composer, because you don't have to compose to picture." For me, the composition process was much harder. When you're composing tightly to picture, the arrangement is predefined. I can watch the scene and think, "Oh, obviously it's all quiet and murky until the guy jumps out of the car. Then the drums start and get faster and faster, and then they end right there when the door slams." That whole roadmap of how the music needs to flow through time is somewhat defined. I'm not wandering around in the endless plains of white, featureless landscape trying to figure out which direction to go. I prefer scoring to picture that's very tightly edited and has internal rhythm as I look at the shots. I draw a lot of my inspiration from the pace and style of the picture editors; I feel almost like we're dance partners. ☒

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