

chris brokaw - music for films

like his buddy warren ellis (of dirty three and bad seeds fame), american multi-instrumentalist chris brokaw has a thing for the soundtracks to michael haneke's movies – because they contain very little or no music at all. despite this, he has scored several movies in the past. in 2005 he worked with film maker leslie mcclleave on the movie "road" - and to coincide with the dvd release of the film (see www.roadthemovie.com for details), the german *connaisseur* label jellyfant is releasing chris' award-winning soundtrack in a gorgeous vinyl-only edition, limited to just 300 copies.

gaesteliste.de recently caught up with chris –a founding member of codeine and come, who's now a solo artist and a member of dirtmusic (with hugo race and chris eckman) and also busy with a myriad of other projects – to discuss his music for films.

gaesteliste.de: for the uninitiated- what's in store on the new soundtrack album?

chris: it's a fun-filled romp through the shadowland of relationship disarray, nuclear contamination and supernatural mystery! the music itself is all instrumental. some sounds like "rock music" (with a full band), much of the rest is lighter instrumentation including bells, melodica, banjo, and acoustic + electric guitars. there is a 'theme song' (in several different guises) and some attempts at 'regional music' (including the opening "cape breton" version of the theme song, which includes, amongst other things, my attempt at simulating a hurdy-gurdy with bowed electric guitar).

gaesteliste.de: generally, when you think of film soundtracks, what's the first score that comes to mind?

chris: this one! i am really not that familiar with film scores. i think the only ones i own are a bernard hermann score for a science fiction film, as well as cd's by alexander hacke and mick harvey of 'various filmwork'. i used to own neil young's score for 'dead man' but sold it - i loved that music in the film, but didn't like it outside of the film, which taught me the important lesson that film music doesn't necessarily need to "work" on its own.

gaesteliste.de: you've got a long history in instrumental music by now, do you see scoring film as just another facet of that or what sets the movie work apart?

chris: in the 4 films i have scored (roddy bogawa's "i was born, but", 2004, and "taken by storm", 2011; leslie mcclleave's "road", 2005; and lana z caplan's "sospira", 2011) i wrote the music specifically to and for the film. there was no thought to whether it would be at all entertaining on its own. in every case i decided afterwards that it could actually make an entertaining record/cd. i think with film scoring i've found a very freeing sense of function - not exactly "detachment", but the sense that i am serving someone's else's vision and can assume any number of different roles to do so. in some ways this feels similar to work i have done accompanying other musicians and dancers - i usually end up putting my own print on it but the first priority is serving someone's else's art.

gaesteliste.de: it appears that you tend to work more and more "project based", adopting certain (unexpected) styles, genres or working methods (the banjo lp or the brokaw/farina album come to mind)...

chris: i think it comes from having interest in a lot of different forms of music and performance, and from observing that it's possible to create all different kinds of records. i think there has been a consistent thread to all of them; i don't think there's any schizophrenia or "genre-hopping". i'm interested in listening to and playing a lot of different forms of music, and i guess i just assume that other people do too and will be able to piece together the various things i want to do. i understand that not everyone will like what i do and that my interests are not shared by all sectors of my audience. i understand that this might be fracturing my audience, or my potential audience; and i haven't quite reconciled how to deal with that. i research music a lot and, again, i just assume other people do, too. i don't think the scope of what i do is particularly weird or a stretch, or that working this way is without precedent, for that matter.

gaesteliste.de: *how did you hook up with leslie for „road“?*

chris: she hired me in early 2005 to do the music; the film was basically complete at that point. she was an imaginative and tireless taskmaster, with endless specific ideas from scene to scene and shot-to-shot about what she wanted. this was a giant departure from the work i'd done with roddy bogawa on "i was born, but", where i watched the film and recorded a bunch of music and gave it all to roddy with suggestions about where to place each piece (all of which he ignored!). both ways of working were really fun for me; the "road" score was much harder and challenging work, i guess, but no less enjoyable or rewarding.

gaesteliste.de: *when you score a scene, how do you approach the work? do you look for an overall vibe, or do you pick any kind of detail in a scene to "hang" your music on?*

chris: it's usually very intuitive and very fast for me. i don't put a lot of theorizing into it. if anything, the process has made me more conscious of how music works in other people's films; but when i'm doing it myself it feels almost automatic. it's been very easy and fun to do. the filmmakers that have hired me to date have done so because they like what i do, so i've rarely felt like i've been called upon to do something that far outside of "what i do". the one and most recent exception has been "taken by storm", roddy's documentary about british album cover artist storm thorgerson, for which i recorded a couple of "fake british rock songs". i found actually creating genre-imitating music a bit discomfiting, but not impossible; i can do it, sort of, but i'm not terribly interested in that and it's probably not a great strength of mine. if i was called upon to create "psychedelic music", for example, i'd rather do my own version of what i think that is than try to imitate what's widely held to be that form. one of my goals is to score a horror film, and part of why i want to do that is because i think most horror movies employ one of 3 or 4 approaches, and i'd like to introduce something different: something that actually brings a different voice or presence to the proceedings - a voice that isn't necessarily trustworthy or playing along with the social contract at hand. not to delve too far into psychological gamesmanship, but, i think there's a lot that can be done with the form that can have all kinds of effects on the audience.

gaesteliste.de: *generally, is scoring a movie more, well, experimental? i assume that you instantly know what kind of sound you are looking for when you write a "regular" song and pick up acoustic or electric guitar or a banjo to get there. is scoring a movie more trial and error?*

chris: if anything, the trial and error is often just simplifying things. one note or one tone or one sound can be very effective in film. it is difficult for me to resist embellishing things and the refinement is usually subtraction. certainly, when i'm scoring a movie i'll think "this instrument would sound really cool here..." and i'm not thinking at all about "how will i play this live?", which often infects my thought when i'm working on my own music.

gaesteliste.de: *does winning an award for "road" have any kind of significance to you (other than the fact that it looks good in the press sheet and will haunt you forever as an interview question?)*

chris: it probably encouraged me to pursue this further. it reassured me, i guess, that my ideas and choices weren't idiotic and that i might have something new to bring to the form. my sense is that it's a very competitive field, but i'd be very happy doing more of this work, as long as it's not danny devito leaning over my shoulder telling me to make something that sounds like madonna, which i think i'd be terrible at.

gaesteliste.de: *if you could call up any director to work on a film project, who would you chose?*

chris: i like the way guy ritchie and jim jarmusch have used music in their films. i'm not sure i'd be able to give either of them what they'd want, however, so, that's a tough question. like i said, my dream job would be to score a horror film, and ideally one that has no blood or violence. i would love to do music for a michael haneke film - i don't actually really follow film very much but i'm always interested in seeing what he's done. werner herzog could be cool, too, although i understand that he tortures his composers. i'd like to score something set underwater - i love the ocean and also find it quite terrifying and i think it'd be fun to explore that. i would like to experiment more with film work that integrates acoustic + electronic instrumentation more, as well as "found sound" from the outside world. i recently purchased a decent mobile recorder and hope to start working more with sounds from outside, in both urban and rural environments.

gaesteliste.de: *do you have any other filmwork coming up?*

chris: i am almost done scoring a new collection of poetry and prose by holly anderson, which has been a huge project for me and very exciting; we hope it will be released this year. "taken by storm" premiered at sxsw in march and recently had a screening in los angeles. roddy was recently asked by moma in new york to show a retrospective of his works, and i will probably be involved in that, doing live accompaniment for at least one of the films (we once did a screening of "i was born but" in chicago where i played electric guitar along with the film, doing counterpoint with what i already had in the film, which roddy and i were both quite happy with). lastly, lana z caplan's film "sospira" is up online this month on pbs and can be found here: <http://worldcompass.org/content/sospira-sigh-longing>

interview by **carsten wohlfeld**