

A WORD FROM NELS (well, actually a few...well, actually...)

I took it as both an honor and a challenge when writer/producer David Breskin commissioned me to write music for *DIRTY BABY*. A visionary recontextualization of the legendary Los Angeles artist Edward Ruscha's "censor strip" works of the '80s and '90s, *DIRTY BABY* would be an art monograph, an array of ghazals, and a collection of music and spoken-word poetry CDs rolled into one. Though I have played quite a bit of music and written some original compositions—even scored a couple of C movies—I'd never previously been asked to compose anything of this scale or seriousness. I was aware of David's previous art/music/poetry project of 2002, the monumental exploration of Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings, *RICHTER 858*, featuring sixteen writers and music by Bill Frisell. Ambitious, exhaustive, sensitive, it was MAJOR. I was also familiar with David's earlier writing as a music journalist, as well as his production work on some marvelous recordings of mostly New York musicians, such as Ronald Shannon Jackson, Tim Berne, and Joey Baron. As a native Angeleno skirting the fringes of a few scenes, I've never seen myself as much of a conceptualist or even (capital "C") Composer, but I took on the assignment with dedication, feeling that I could attempt such a daunting task because of my awareness of Ruscha, of L.A., of Breskin, of Frisell. However difficult the task seemed, maybe I could really do it...? It helped greatly that David seemed to have a startling degree of faith in, and admiration for, my abilities as a composer. Weird!

It also surely helped that I grew up with a deep appreciation of visual art, instilled in me by my parents and enhanced by my twin brother Alex, always a gifted visual artist. And further, that I not only had the successful recent example of Frisell's collision with, and connection to, the work of Richter, but also my own real-time collaborations with the L.A.-based painter Norton Wisdom to draw upon. Meanwhile, Ed Ruscha has been lurking around the edges of my consciousness since I saw his self-published books on the counter of bookstores like the Free Press Bookstore and Papa Bach so many years ago, well before the term "impulse buy" worked its way into the vernacular. After following so-called Pop Art as a teen and later working for years in an art book store, I was well familiar with Ruscha's work—it comes out of the tap in Los Angeles!—as well as his odd sort of celebrity and his dry humor. These aspects of his work seemed to inform a whole school of thought in the 1980s, by which time Ruscha was a giant on the scene. My first and biggest question was: How I could add to or illuminate any corner of this man's work *sonically*?

So it came as relief when David told me that he/we would be using, not the iconic works now nearly *branded* as "Ruschas" but rather lesser-known works: the beautiful and haunting *Silhouette* paintings, largely of the '80s and happily my favorite Ruscha work; and the *Cityscapes*, largely of the '90s and previously unknown to me. These works do not, as in the case of his most famous pieces, have words floating graphically on the picture plane, but rather censor strips which Ruscha himself calls "dumb blocks," which *stand in for* or "cover over" (conceptually) the words of each picture's title. Many

Silhouettes do have traditional Ruschavian language writ large on the picture plane, but none Breskin selected for *DIRTY BABY*, and my comfort with the project deepened as I understood I would be able to create/negotiate "wordless" music. Even so, as an unabashed sort of expressionist/romantic, I wasn't sure that I could get fully on the Ruscha wavelength.

Though David had only yet written and shared a handful of the sixty-six ghazals that would populate the book by the time I began my own writing efforts, he'd already placed the paintings in a clear narrative sequence, vividly re-imagining them. This speculative (re)sequencing aspired to use the work as a trigger for some intrinsically American commentaries on some intrinsically American issues and dilemmas. The fact that, to my mind, this re-imagining boldly succeeded encouraged me to believe that my own contribution could be equally valid and could stake its own claim to the pictures. This was getting interesting! I started re-investigating Ruscha's work. I had known people who worked for him; had seen him around a few times. I read *Leave Any Information At The Signal*, a compendium of Ruscha writings and interviews, and David barraged me with more Ruscha books.

A project like this unavoidably approaches (and yet naturally enough avoids) the very idea of SOUNDTRACK. On Side A, there *is* a real story being told, what David only half-jokingly calls "a time-lapse history of Western Civilization, American subdivision." The primordial New Land is "discovered" by European interlopers and settlers; they push westward; land and slaves are purchased, fences go up; cities are created, the land altered

in extreme; proximity and increased ease of communication beget, ironically, *isolation*... And then there is David's bracing poetry (in the book!) as another element, a guide or narrator, to play off of. David did give me clues to what he wanted for the music, but no specific direction save for the initial Side A brief: create one long piece of music, not a collection of discrete songs. The early '70s works of Miles Davis, specifically a piece like the Miles/Joe Zawinul composition "Great Expectations" (with its on-and-off grooving) could be a template of sorts. *Bitches Brew, On The Corner*: music that had range but was clearly *of a piece*. Yet it seemed obvious to both of us that there should be a progression from acoustic (the primeval, prehistoric world through Native-American America) to electric (settled and urban/suburban America). I leave it to the listener to take these general reports and descriptions and add their own nuanced interpretations, of course. But my choices of harmonica, pedal steel guitar, and Hammond organ were all intended to reflect a sort of Americana, while the music and choice of musicians could at any moment transcend and/or subvert this notion should it become facile or rigid.

That said, I pretty much messed up any literal timeline, meaning that you can't really look at the painting reproductions in sequence while playing the music and have everything seamlessly sync up. Because there is improvisation involved (and skillful improvisers), not everything can, or should, be scripted. For example, when one gets to the major "hinge" in the narrative, the two anomalous, *non-silhouettes*—"LLLLLONG TALL TALES" and "PLENTY BIG HOTEL ROOM (PAINTING FOR THE AMERICAN INDIAN)"—I left great latitude and abstractness in the structuring (or barely structuring) of the music. For my ideas connected to the latter painting, the musicians were cued by

my guitar neck to play chords in different keys of their choosing, using only the chord number system employed by players in Nashville. This one simple device was an attempt to accomplish no less than three things concurrently: to create polyphony (a perhaps obvious and primitive nod to Ives and Ruggles, et al.); to make a sly reference to folk and country & western music methodologies; and to create an uneasy version of the *anthemic*.

The whole of Side A was also meant to be more concise, but in the end no one wanted to edit what I thought (in advance) would surely be edited, namely the last two groove-oriented sections (Parts V and VI). In the first, Jon Brion's vintage EMS Synthi riffing (that's no loop, that's him) became like a mandala, brought way forward in the mix, around which the piece spun and carried forward. In the second, the Trip-Hop vibe led to an extended, distended musical discourse which rhymed with the dark undertones and barely-suppressed emotions of Ruscha's silhouetted houses, right through the "hanging" sign of "DRUGS, HARDWARE, BARBER, VIDEO." Ultimately, the acoustic instruments return and the land is reclaimed by time/nature. My mini-guitar and Jeremy Drake's banjo uke are left, the same basic BPMs (Beats Per Minute) have been maintained through the entire piece, but lots has happened. Maybe it IS a soundtrack after all....

Side B is a whole other matter. In contradistinction to Side A, David wanted me to write a one-minute (or less!) composition to accompany each of the thirty-three *Cityscapes* on Side B. (Note: there is no randomness in a Breskin concept—it is highly considered and

airtight.) This meant I was going to have to write, uh, thirty-three pieces! Ouch! In contemplating the task, I wondered: how could I make these thirty-three miniatures add up to something more than a string of *amuse-bouches*? How could I shape and structure them so that they would become, in aggregate, a satisfying, substantial meal?

These *Cityscapes* are not representational cityscapes and are (perhaps) the most abstract work of Ruscha's fifty-year oeuvre. There are no images, save for the dumb blocks themselves—created in acrylic or oil, or less conventionally, by removing pigment with bleach. (Just as there are two exceptions on Side A, in the paired non-silhouettes at its center, here there are two exceptions to this "non-image" rule but at the very outside edges, bookending Side B: in the faintest circled image of a coin in the first painting and the sly insertion of a red "I" in the last.) As with all the censor strip work, language is emphasized even as it is obscured. In the various threats, taunts, commands, pleas and loaded queries which grace these pictures, David found his trigger: he would go back to the "Cradle of Civilization" to explore the U.S. presence in Iraq (most particularly), with some expansion/bleeding into other areas, as Imperialism tends to. In preparation, we discussed classic film noir scores, jazz scores, "event" music, and the fact that Heavy Metal was being used by American troops to torture Muslim prisoners. Given all this, a sort of pastiche approach, pioneered by composers like John Zorn, seemed natural and right. I also drew on my experiences playing with and/or listening to artists who had rethought structure/improvisation: Wadada Leo Smith, Vinny Golia, Air (not the French guys), the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, the ROVA Saxophone Quartet.

So Side B is a total mash-up of free jazz, hard rock, grindcore, Morton Feldman-esque swaths of indeterminacy, blues, Ellington/Evans references, spy music, and more—all to create tension between these sensibilities, to highlight differences, to punctuate conflict. I used every strategy I could, trying to make the punishment fit the crime. It should be noted that I failed my assignment, in that the vast majority of my mini-works ran over a minute (sometimes considerably) but I was issued a passing grade, with David insisting that the minute-per-painting paradigm was "suggestive, not prescriptive." I would love to blame the heavens on the increased program length incurred at the end of B.12 ("BE CAUTIOUS ELSE WE BE BANGIN ON YOU"), when rain began pounding the skylights of Ocean Studios, but the piece had already come to three minutes by then.

Humor is almost always evident in Ruscha's work. So either despite, or because of, this raw material—the implicit or explicit violence implied by the *Cityscapes*—and while attempting to avoid kitsch, there *is* humor on Side B: some of it morbid, some scathing, I grant you. So much humor is a squirmfest, and so much that scares us makes us chuckle in discomfort. For a piece such as B.20 ("YOU TALK YOU GET KILLED") I used the rhythm of the words in the title as a riff on which to base the whole piece. I did the same on B.22 ("DON'T THREATEN ME WITH YOUR THREATS"). Conversely, a piece like B.04 ("DO AS I SAY OR...") has no written notes but rather instructions to the ensemble, which was divided into four independently operating units. To my ear, the results sound quite composed. By contrast, B.28 ("I CAN'T TAKE IT NO MORE") is completely composed, and it marks my (very awkward) conducting debut. And then there's B.07 ("AGREE TO OUR TERMS OR PREPARE YOURSELF FOR A BLAST

FURNACE). Its alarm-bell-into-car-bomb-explosion still chills me to the bone, and it freaks me out that this piece, like all this music, was played by the ensemble in real time.

Which brings me to the musicians themselves. Without attempting to profile each glorious one, I want to say that once I was clear on the instrumentation for each "Side" of *DIRTY BABY*, I decided (and David agreed) that the vast majority of both groups needed to consist of musicians living in Los Angeles, my rather disrespected hometown. This was a joy for me! It meant that many of my favorite musicians on the planet would be front and center. Some I'd worked with for more than thirty years, as with Messrs. Golia, Peet, and Gauthier. And one I'd "worked with" my whole life: my twin brother Alex. The foreigners are only three: Scott Amendola and Devin Hoff (two-thirds of The Nels Cline Singers) and Denver pedal steel wiz Glenn Taylor. I bow deeply in gratitude to these players, for their amazing talent and versatility, their patience and commitment. There is a lot of improvising involved in these pieces, and my implicit trust in, and familiarity with, their formidable skills made it so much easier to envision this music and *know* that it would be played splendidly. Much had to be accomplished in little time—the entirety was recorded in three consecutive days, in January of 2008—and I am truly indebted to them for making this music come to life.

Gracious thanks also to Ron Saint Germain, the large-eared and large-spirited man behind the board; his diligent assistant at Ocean, Albert Mata; to my assistant in score generation, Gavin Templeton; to Joe Gastwirt, for mastering acumen; and to my longtime comrade Jeff Gauthier, who *is* Cryptogramophone Records. And to "db" himself, David

Breskin, the ultra-thorough visionary from whose mind this all sprang. And beyond the vision came the tireless dedication to seeing everything through to the (distant, distant) end. I could go on.... Maybe I already have!

And as usual, thanks and love to all the ardent listeners, ranters, raconteurs, free-form radio radicals, shy shadow people and egregious exhibitionists, hip priests and priestesses, aliens and asymmetrical ascenders, watchers of the skies and flies from the ashcans of America and beyond. – N