Richard Gibbs

Film composer and music director

Media Masters – September 30th 2021

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediamasters.fm

Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined down the line from Malibu Los Angeles, California, by Richard Gibbs, the leading American film composer and music producer. Richard's credits include Dr. Doolittle, Big Momma's House, Queen of the Damned, the television series Battlestar Galactica and the first season of The Simpsons. He began his career as a keyboard player in the influential new wave band Oingo Boingo, formed by future Hollywood composer, Danny Elfman. Richard's Woodshed Recording Studio in Malibu is one of the most sought after facilities in the world and has been used by high-profile artists like U2, Coldplay, and Sting. Richard, thank you for joining me.

Well, thank you for that lovely intro, Paul.

It's a pleasure, and I should declare to our listeners that we're very old friends. So if our listeners think that I'm being a bit cruel to you and you've been cruel back, I think they should know that we do like to tease one another.

Oh, I can't wait. That's the whole reason I'm doing this.

Indeed. Let me start with some sensible questions first because there's lots to get through. I mean, you've provided the soundtrack to more than 60 top films and television shows. How did you get into that? And frankly, what are you working on now?

Let me do it backwards. Let me start with what I'm working on now. Nothing, because I am so busy still in recovery from the woolsey fire, which burned down our house here in Malibu. So, I've become somewhat of a paralegal where we were involved in two lawsuits, we resolved one favorably, which I'm not allowed to talk about as part of the settlement. And the other one, we're part of a mass action lawsuit against Southern California Edison. And that's taking up quite a bit of time and we've had to move three times since the fire, but I'm speaking to you from my studio, which was

on the same property as our house and the studio was miraculously unharmed. And if you want to learn more about that, go to episode 12 of my podcast, Invisible Arts.

Was it sort of an accident of geography that the studio was saved?

No, there was nothing accidental about it. I mean, in retrospect we realised it wasn't accidental. First off it turns out that if you design a studio correctly and the studio was definitely over-designed, one of the most salient features of a recording studio of course, is that it's soundproof. So sound doesn't come in and go out now, how do you achieve that? You make it airtight. Well, if it's airtight, there's no little drafts of air that suck in embers and so on. So that right alone made, even though the studio is called Woodshed Recording, Woodshed Recording is made of wood. The is a clear douglas fir and cedar shingles and mahogany.

So it's a *wood* shed?

By the way, and marine spar varnish, which is extremely flammable, but because it was so tightly constructed, the fire literally went over. It didn't just miss it. It tried to hit it. I got back in the day after the fire and there were thousands of embers all around the perimeter of the studio that had bounced off of it like they were hitting the rock of Gibraltar. But the other factor is that the studio is surrounded with these gardens that were built and designed by my wife that are basically her experimental grounds for regenerative agriculture and the plants around the studio, the roots go down three and I'm saying grass, just grass. The roots go down three feet because of the way she does this. And this soil without going too far down this road here, this soil will hold 30 times its weight in water. So it wasn't just a studio that didn't burn. It was the trees, the grasses, the plants, none of that burned. The firemen couldn't believe it when they came here, we actually have a drone video that's on the woodshed recording website that was shot a week after the fire. And it's kind of mind-blowing. 'Cause you can see that all of the greenery goes right to the property edges completely green and all around, looks like right after World War II.

To state the obvious, that must have been an incredibly stressful period because, although luckily the recording studio was saved, you've lost your home. You're living between homes, that must've been stressful and impacted your creativity. You've got battles with insurance companies and all these kinds of things. I mean, I bet you're glad to be at the other side of it now, but frankly, it just shows you that climate change is real. You know, that your business and your life is having to deal with the fact that there's wildfires now in and around Malibu.

To be somewhat fair about it, there have always been wildfires in and around Malibu. That's part of the cycle here. There was an old Johnny Carson joke, he lived just down the street from us and somebody would say, I don't want to live in California, you don't have the seasons, he'd go. Yeah, we do. Sure we do. We have heat, drought, floods and fires.

That's quite a good joke.

And you know, The Chumash Indians who were our precursors on this land,

The people with the original and proper claim to the land.

Most importantly, proper tending of the land, they would burn back brush all the time. They were doing controlled burns, and they did them right. And it would protect their structures or teepees or whatever. And they don't do that anymore here. And that's a shame because you get this huge buildup of brush and trees and everything else that have been allowed that aren't being tended. Like a tree, a healthy tree. I know this is not what you called to talk to me about Paul, but a healthy tree won't normally just burn. It's a tree that has a lot of dead branches, the dead branches burn. And then that eventually catches the tree on fire too. But if you've tended to it, you've cut down all the dead stuff and taken it away or burned it off in a controlled burn, then that area will handle a wildfire quite well. So we have that going on top of climate change, of course, which increased temperatures and wild weather patterns, don't help.

You lost all the scores and arrangements from your career. Did you not?

Yeah, that was wild. Everything that I've written, including charts that I'd written when I was in college, when I used to hand write everything, so many of these scores were handwritten. When I was finished conducting them, I would put them up in the attic of the house, all very neatly packed away in little plastic boxes with labels and everything. And that's just evaporated.

Sorry to hear that. Let's go back to the beginning then. I mean, 60 top films and TV shows. Tell us how you got into music and how did you start to have a career in music? What were the first steps you took along the way? I mean, I've known you for many years now, Richard, but it seems to me that you have an incredibly glamorous lifestyle surrounded by music, creativity, and Hollywood. What's not to like?

Well, I'm not surrounded by Hollywood. I'm in Malibu, much better than Hollywood.

Yeah Hollywood's shite, I agree with you.

How did I get started? Well, I was born a young boy, I was kind of traditional, forced piano lessons from the age of five, started playing guitar when I was like nine years old, played trombone in school bands and so on and just started playing and then I started playing in rock bands when I was in junior high and high school and got the bug. And ended up going to Berklee College of Music in Boston and achieved a degree in classical composition from Berklee.

I bet you were a hit with the ladies with that.

You have no idea how many classical groupies there are.

Wow, Absolutely. I mean, why would he want to get into rock when you can play the violin?

All jokes aside, I have to say that I'm going with my wife to see the LA Phil and I'll be sitting next to her and Gustavo Dudamel is conducting, and she's just enraptured by his hands and way moves. And I was like, oh God, like I'm going to lose you to Gustavo Dudamel and then to play into your angle of glamour, rock style life that I live. Chris Martin has been a long-term client of the studio. And Chris was hosting a kind of jam session and then dinner here at the studio at which I was recording, which at the time was in our backyard, which of course we don't live there anymore because houses are gone. But anyway, it was in our backyard and they set up a dinner and we brought in catering and he invited all these people to come jam with him and record it. Nothing was never intended for release. It was just kind of for fun. And Dudamel came in and played violin as part of it. So we were sitting at dinner with Dudamel and Chris Martin and a bunch of other people. And then I got the jam with Dudamel in my own studio.

And did your wife go off with him then? I mean, did you manage to keep her on side?

Where is she? God, come to think of it, she wasn't home yesterday.

So why film composing then? So there you are, you're doing your studies and you've decided on a career in music. How do you get into a career like that?

Well, kind of in a very funny, backwards way. I'm a lifelong surfer. I'm from Florida. I'm from Ohio first as a little boy. And then my family exploded and I moved with my mother to Daytona beach, a block from the beach when I was 12 and took up surfing and started going to surf films and all that. I've got another podcast about that. Another episode called ‘Only a Dad’ where I talk about ‘The Endless Summer’ and scoring a movie that the guy who made ‘The Endless Summer’ executive produced, and was directed by his son. But the reason I bring that up is, I would be out bobbing in the waves, waiting for a wave. And when you're a surfer and you sit there in the water for sometimes an hour without catching a wave, you’re just kind of sitting there hoping a good wave comes along. And I would start running music in my head the whole time. Maybe it's just the leads up on the song I listened to that morning, or maybe I'm thinking of something original while I'm just bobbing in the water in high school. And I started thinking, wouldn't it be great, all these surf movies back then they would, and still to this day, surf movies, for those of you who've never watched one, it's kind of like porno for surfers. If you go to a classic surf movie with a bunch of surfers in an auditorium, they're like hooting and hollering. Every time somebody drops in on a wave like, ‘Ooh, ahhh’ it's pretty nuts. So surf filmmakers would put in,

generally speaking, they're putting in rock music, maybe some jazz here and there, and maybe some hip hop these days, but they never score them, certainly not with a classical orchestra. And I always wanted to do that. And back then, the very first time I put music to image was these surf filmmakers that lived down the street from me, these two brothers named Ron and Bob. And they asked could I help them by just putting songs in their film? And I had the biggest record collection on the block. So I sat down with the film and timed out, made a tape that was in perfect sync to the movie, made a little cassette tape on my little radio shack cassette recorder, and then would go around with them in Florida while they would show the surf movies in auditoriums. And I would hit start in synchronicity with their projector so that all the music would hit at the different points in the film where different waves are going on or talking is happening and whatever. It's like a live performance in a way. And that was the first time I got the bug. Honestly, I didn't even know there was such a thing as a film composer. I just knew this was fun to do. And then ended up going to Berklee college of music. I studied film scoring while I was there. I took one course in it and then came out here and I started out my professional career as a session player. And I played on tons of albums and movie soundtracks and television soundtracks. I played on Nightrider and St. Elsewhere. And then movies, The Last Starfighter. I can't even remember, there were so many, I was just doing sessions. I would do two or three sessions a day bouncing from studio to studio, riding my bicycle from studio to studio while my guys would set up my gear in each place.

And did you know what you would do, for example for Nightrider, was that for the theme, or was that for the episodes, where you given a sheet of music and were told that it was some guy in a leather jacket and a hairy chest and a talking car going around solving crimes? What were you told?

No, no, no. First off, I wasn't a composer. That was... I think his name was Sylvester Lebay. And quite often the theme for a show is written by a different person than the person who does the rest of the music for the show, which was my case with The Simpsons. Danny Elfman wrote the theme, but I did the underscore for the first season. But going back to Nightrider, it was a very synthetic sounding score, and it would be five synth players all sitting in the studio, reading charts and often triggering sequencers. And so I'm talking in the eighties, it was pretty crude technology compared to what's out there now. But always when I'm working on a movie, even as a player, here's where it was, this was the other touch point for me Paul was when, other than the surf movies, I started working as a session player and I got hired on The Last Starfighter, by the composer Craig Safan, but I'm playing synthesiser live with an orchestra. There were three keyboard players. And we're on a big soundstage to, I don't know how many people are in that orchestra, I'm going to say 80. It's just a guess. There was a big orchestra. And we rehearsed the chart that we're going to record for, do run through once or twice and then say, okay, let's do a take. And it was so dramatic. There literally was one of those, like those Frankenstein scissors switches for power that are on the wall. You know, it's like one of those, and all the lights go off and a little red light goes on over the conductor’s head - Craig Safan in this case, the composer - and then against the back wall of the studio is a huge screen. And the scene that we are recording too, is being played behind us while we're recording. Huge screen, like the size of a cinema screen. And the magic

of that moment just blew me away. Just the power of sitting there and playing and not hearing any dialogue. So the music is completely emphasized and I really saw the power of what music adds to the visual arts and fell in love with it. And that's when it really hit me and this is something I think I'd really like to do. And years later, a buddy of mine just said, ‘hey,’ he just knew me as a keyboard player and playing on all these rock dates and he says, ‘but you're classically trained. Right?’ And I said, ‘yeah, I'm a classical composition.’ He knew of a movie where they were looking for a composer, but they didn't want a standard composer. They wanted somebody to do arrangements of Elvis Presley tunes and Van Halen and stuff. Or David Lee Roth actually was. So I went and met with the director and he said, I don't want to hire a film composer. And I just looked at him and kind of laughed. And I said, that's okay. I'm not a film composer. I’ve never scored anything. And he hired me because I pitched an idea of how to adapt these songs into score and had a blast. It was a movie called Sweetheart Stance with Don Johnson, Susan Surandon, and Jeff Daniels. And to get that opportunity right at the get-go is, now I realise how rare an opportunity that is. Normally you kind of have to work your way up through the ranks as an assistant to a composer, and you score some crappy little infomercial and kind of hope to get discovered. I just kind of got plucked out of the ranks of session players and did that. That led to the music supervisor on that gig saying, ‘Hey, there's this new show over at Fox and they're having trouble holding down a musical director. Do you want that job?’ I said: ‘sure.’ So I went over and met with Tracy Allman and James L. Brooks and pitched them a different idea, I said, ‘I want to do it. I want to do the music live. I want the band to be on the stage while Tracy's acting.’ And so that we can quickly improvise if we have to change things. And the producers were all rightfully horrified at that idea because so many things could go wrong, but Tracy loved it because she then could have somebody to bounce off of. And that's what we did. And it was amazing. And the important part about that show in terms of my career, the Tracey Ullman show was the birthplace of The Simpsons.

You scored the first season didn’t you?

Of the Simpsons? Yes. But The Simpsons started as little one-minute shorts on the Tracy Ullman show.

I remember them.

Yeah. So you can look on YouTube and find them, the animation was totally different, but it was there, the show was there. And that's how I met Matt. And he asked me to score the first, well, he asked me to score the show and then totally coincidentally, they had asked Danny Elfman to write the theme. And a lot of the producers didn't even know, I had one producer come to me like I'm hired to do it. And they said, well, do you think you can write in the style of this guy, Danny Elfman. And I looked at him, and they were like ‘you don't know?’ ‘What are you talking about?’ I was in a band with that guy for five years, if anybody can knock him off and imitate him, it's me. Sure. No problem. And The Simpsons is what really launched my career at that point, because it was this huge, surprise hit. Nobody thought it was going to do what it did.

And it was off and running. And then the next movie I did was ‘Say Anything,’ also for Fox, and that was another big hit and it was pretty much off and running from there. That's the long story.

Well, we've got all the time in the world and this is the bit that’s very interesting. Tell us what’s your process? I've enjoyed many films that you've scored, but do you meet with the director and then you sort of come up with some themes or do you watch the film first or you just get a copy of the script? Could you talk us through sort of the first time that you've ever heard of something, to when you’re sitting in the cinema, watching it and it's your composing on the music. What’s the process?

Well, as you might imagine, it tends to be different for every project, but I'll try to call out a typical process that most of these movies follow. First off is getting hired, right. And usually the director has heard something else that I've done. Or my agent has convinced him by sending him some music that I'm the right guy. And so I go in and meet with the director and determine if we just hit it off to start with, if it's going to be a creative meeting of the minds. And then I get hired. And usually composers aren't hiring until the movie is deep into the editing process. So the composer is usually the last major hire on a movie. They're exceptions: ‘Queen of the Damned’ is one. I was one of the very first hires on that before they'd even cast the movie. But this one was, while I'm thinking of just all the typical ones, usually I'm hired that they've already got the movie edited or close to a final edit. And then they'll give me, well, back in the day, it'd be a videotape of the movie of a rough edit with usually what's called temp music cut in, and then I'll watch the movie usually with the temp track in there and get the vibe of the movie. And hopefully the temp track is somewhat of a guide that now I understand what they're looking for based on their musical choices. Right? So then the next thing that happens is what's called the spotting session. And that sounds like it might be something exotic, but all that really means, and also sounds like a disease, but the spotting session is where I'll sit with the director and the editor. Ideally, it's just the three of us. Sometimes the sound effects guy will be in there too, or whatever, but usually it's just me and the director and the editor, and we'll watch the movie. And the typical movie, let's say, is 90 minutes long. So, we'll watch the movie very, very carefully, very slowly and stop and talk and say, well, it's called a spotting session because he simply say, I want to put music in this spot. And I want to put music in that spot and also a person called a music editor will be there making notes, and we'll talk about it and we'll have a conversation. ‘I think the music should start right there, when she points to her eyebrow, that's a key point, let's start there.’ And quite often, the beginning of a musical cue is a very strong entry. I mean that just the fact that music comes in and makes people go: ‘Whoa, what's going on?’ Even if subconsciously, so the spotting is really crucial. And then within that scene, we'll talk about, well when she goes over and yells out the window, I should probably leave that alone. I'll duck out of that. And I'll have the orchestra pause for a couple seconds and then we'll come back in when she comes back into the room, I'm just making stuff up here. But so that's a spotting session and that will take typically three or four hours to go through a 90 minute film. Then the music editor puts that all together in basically a book where everything is cataloged for me. I know exactly what each piece of music is, where it stops and starts, what the director wants based on our

conversation, those notes will guide me. And I'll go back home and start writing. Now back in the good old days - the pre-computer days and they were good old days - I would sit down and watch the scene over and over with the videotape recorder, watch the movie and sit there with a stopwatch and a metronome and figure out what the correct tempo is. And start writing, sit at the piano and sketch it out with pencil and write everything out and then do sketches that would show, okay, violins are going to play this line and French horns are going to do that, and write it all out long hand. And it's a much better process. The problem with that process is that, now it's time for the director to come and review. He wants to hear what I've done. So come over to my studio and I'll sit at the piano, I'll play the scene on the videotape. And I'll play on the piano and explain to him as I'm playing. That's going to be clarinets there. And he asked to get into my musical imagination with me and trust me that it's going to be great. And it's so that when we actually do record the orchestra, it's the first time it's ever heard. And the first time I hear it too, for that matter, I hear it in my mind's ear, but I don't really know what's going to happen. And every single time, when I do a movie in that process and I get in front of the orchestra and drop my baton, it's like magic to me. It's just mind-blowing. It's the most powerful thing I can think of because all of a sudden everything comes to life. It's like the birth of a kid. It's like, 'Oh my God, this is amazing.' All of this. Wow. And all these guys are playing this. And I would literally start dancing on the podium sometimes. And the orchestra would laugh at me. And I also knew a lot of the players in the orchestra because I used to be one of them. I was a session player. So my sessions were always really fun. That's how it used to be. So record it. And also used to be that in the recording, it's recorded live. Basically, they record the orchestra and that's it. It's a live mix. What you hear on playback that's all there is to it. It's done. So after a week of recording on a given movie, I'm done, there's nothing else for me to do. Then computers come along and sequencers and samplers and synthesisers. And I'm one of those guys, I was synthesis, I was a programmer. A programmer since programming, not computer programmer. And it completely changed the dynamic of film scoring. Now you can do what's called a mock-up, so you can take what you've written and do imitation orchestral scores. So the director gets to hear what the orchestra is actually going to be doing. And the first couple times I did mock-ups I was doing handwritten scores. And then I go back in, mock it up with synthesisers and mock up a handful of cues so the director could hear it. And everybody else was going through this same change at this time. I'm talking about the nineties. And I play stuff back, and that's great. And when we actually record the real orchestra, it's no longer a surprise. It sounds better. It sounds much better, but still there's no surprise in it. There's no magic if it kind of takes that away. But the other thing that happened, that really to me is to the detriment of film scoring, is that composers, including myself, started thinking 'why do I even bother to write it out?' I'll just play in all the parts. I'll just play them and create my scores that way. And that's how most film scoring and certainly television scoring is done these days. The composer is sitting there with a computer and their keyboards and they're in a sequencer and they're building the score by playing in all the individual parts. But there's several problems with that. First off, it's incredibly tedious to do. It's much faster to write a violin line than it is to play it. And it loses quite a bit of musical imagination. And now you're limited. You're automatically limited even if subconsciously, to what your capabilities are as a player and as a synth programmer. And you're limited to the sounds that you have at your fingertips, whatever samples you have, and you can have an amazingly

deep library of samples of orchestral instruments. I do, but I've spoken many times in film scoring classes at colleges around the country. And I always get this question with the kids these days, like, ‘well, what do you use?’ I go, ‘what do you mean? So what sample libraries are you using? What are the sounds that you used to score?’ Because they're thinking, ‘oh, I'm going to get those.’ And I just laugh. And I say, ‘here's the thing, guys. I can stock up big computers all around me, surround myself with computers and have all these samples of all the different articulations of all the different instruments as best I can. But one guy with one violin, with all of the variations of pitch, articulation, tempo, dynamics, all of the different possible combinations. It's almost infinite what they can do. And so, one guy with one violin could fill up all my computers with all the different possibilities of every pitch, every dynamic and everything, and even so you are limited because you've just taken a creative ally out of the equation when you do it with samplers. You don't have that player anymore. So, it just sucks the magic right out of music to me. And I can fool you. I can do a score and I could send you a piece of music and you'd think, oh what orchestra was that? I’d say no, I did that myself in the box as they say, and it sounds great, but I know if I took that same piece of music and put it in front of an orchestra, it would sound that much better, but because it has gotten good enough, that’s my least favorite term in art, it's good enough. That's terrible. If it’s good enough, It's not good enough at all, because it's good enough that the average listener can't really tell the difference. The standards have dropped in the quality of film and television scoring over the last 20 years, pretty dramatically. And even more importantly is that because everybody is used to everybody, meaning directors and producers and studio heads are used to hearing mock-ups of everything. Now, everybody becomes an expert. Well, what do you think? Don't you think that should be English horns?’ And I'm looking at him like, ‘what the f***! You don't even know what a f***ing English horn is! Well, you got everybody in their janitor suddenly have opinions on what you're doing. And it ruins the creative process. It completely commodifies it. And there's so many, there's one very extremely popular show. I won't name, that was scored pseudo orchestrally. I can't listen to it. It sounds like plastic to me. I don't know how else to put it, so that’s the end of my rant. Sorry.

It was a very enjoyable rant. How much creative freedom do you have producing a film score? Are you tied to the cues of what you're seeing on the big screen and what the director's vision is? Are they quite prescriptive on what you've got to do? And do they sometimes say that you're not going to pull focus? And how dramatic are you allowed to be?

Well, yeah. I mean, my boss on a film, typically, not 100% of the time, but I'll say 98% of the time, is the director and it is the director's vision that's being put on the screen. And I'm there to act as a kind of a musical psychologist for the director to find out what it is that the director's emotional vision is for a given scene. It's like, okay, how can I emphasise that? Or get out of the way of it or play against it? And that's the discussion that we'll have during the spotting session with the director. And he comes out and listens to themes and I'll play it for him. And if they don't like it then I change it, the line that every composer has when a director says, no, that's not working for me. I'll say fine. I'll put it on my solo album. Let's do something else. So it does happen. But of course, what you hope is that you have a relationship with the director

that you're able to read their minds, musically you're able to get inside their heads. And that's a big reason why you see these long standing relationships often between a composer and the director, because they are simpatico creatively, like Danny and Tim Burton, he scored almost all of Tim Burton's movies, probably the most famous pairing in modern history is Steven Spielberg and John Williams. I only recently learned this. I mean, John Williams is a master beyond belief, that Spielberg has gotten to the point where he doesn't even do a spotting session with John Williams. He just sends him the movie and says, okay, I'll see you on the scoring stage. That's a dream as a composer to have that much creative control and be able to really, but that's because they've been working together since the very beginning of Spielberg's career and he knows John Williams is going to do them right. So we trust them implicitly. Most directors don't trust their composer to that degree. And understandably so, especially when it's the first time when you've worked with somebody, it takes a minute. But anyway, that's kind of the gamut. It can be anywhere from total control freaks to Spielberg letting John Williams do his thing.

I don't understand the creative process. Where do the melodies come from, are you in the shower? Do you sit at the piano? How do you get inspiration creatively?

I know this sounds weird, but out of thin air. I've spoken at creative workshops about this process, answering that very question. And when you really think about it, what it gets down to is cliches. We all grew up with the same musical cliches in Western culture, right. We all know teasing, that's a childhood bully. Immediately, we know what that means, right? And so now you don't want to just use that, but you want to play off of it. And how do you evoke that same feeling of being teased with an orchestra? Do you hint at that? Do you just hit at the rhythm of it just enough to trigger somebody's emotional response mechanism without them realizing how you did it? So there is that. There is playing with cliches. I mean, every movie is a different process for me. And I actually take pride in the fact that my scores all sound quite different from one another. I don't have one specific style that I've been pigeonholed, I've done hip hop movies where I'm doing everything with drum loops and guitars and whatever. And then other movies where it's strictly, or somewhere on to sit down with the solo piano. It just depends on what the movie calls for. But my favorite story, if I may tell a story, may I tell a story Paul?

With pleasure.

So I was hired to score 101 Dalmatians: Patch’s, London Adventure, which was a direct video animated movie that was animated and directed and written as a sequel to the original 101 Dalmatians. So it was done in the same style as the original 101 Dalmations animationalies. And everything about it was very throwback and it was really fun. And I was hired to do it. It was an animated movie, animated movies tend to have a quite different process that the production process is much slower. It takes a lot longer to put together an animated movie than it does to shoot people acting. So, they asked me to write the theme for the movie, before there was anything for me to look at, I had a script, I read the script, I knew kind of what was going to happen.

But they said, can you write this theme because we want to animate the title sequence to your theme. And that's a little daunting because, that's literally a blank piece of paper. They just told me, all we're going to do is have these black dots that are going to bounce around on the screen. And it'll eventually coalesce into the title of the movie. So, work with that. That's all I had just a description of a bunch of black dots popping around on the screen. So I'm not looking at a scene. I'm not reacting to an actress's emotion or the director's vision, I'm setting the pace. Right? And like I say, it was daunting. I'll probably take three weeks just writing the first piece of music, because the most important thing is getting that theme and the colour and the style down. Once I have that, everything else is almost like typing from there on it's like, okay, now I know what to do. I can just play off of that. Do variations of the theme, speed it up, slow it down, minor key, major key, change orchestration, whatever I want to do with it, I can do that. But first I have to get that. What's the language, what's the musical language of the film. So this was that moment. But I didn't have anything to react to. And one day I just thought I'm taking a break and I went surfing at Zuma beach right around the corner from my house. And I'm out in the water. And if this is a callback to me telling the story about how I first got this idea, it was putting classical music to surf movies. I'm out there surfing. There's an important thing I have to tell you. I have a bit of an unusual musical defect. I have very poor musical memory. I could never be that piano player and a cocktail bar playing hundreds of songs by heart. I can't do it. I don't remember stuff like that. I have an amazing short-term memory from all my years as a session player. I can play something if a guy says, oh, can you play that again, but change at one note? Every time I can do it, absolutely perfectly. Short-term but the second I walk away from that session. I forgot what I played. I don't have that memory. I don't have that gene to remember repertoire, which most musicians have. There's an advantage to that. It means that I tend to be a clean slate. I don't accidentally lift music from other sources because I don't remember it. So, I go surfing, bobbing in the water waiting to catch a couple of waves or two, beautiful day, beautiful morning. And suddenly, the whole time in the background, when you're scoring something it's running in your head, it has to, it's just running. Your brain is subconsciously trying to solve this puzzle. And in this case, it solved it while I was in the water and surfing all of a sudden the whole theme. I'd never had this happen before, by the way, the whole theme popped in my head. I knew what every instrument was going to play. I knew the articulations. It just popped in my head like right there. Normally I'll just get a melody or an idea. And I build off of that. I'll have maybe four, eight bars, but this thing, the whole thing popped in my head. I could sing it in my head. What the saxes were going to play, what the drums were going to do, everything from beginning to end. I knew it. And I never had that happen before. And I was so kind of like, wow, that's wow, there it is. But I'm out in the middle of the ocean and I have a terrible musical memory, right. So how am I going to remember this? I'm too far away from home. So I paddled in and went to a payphone back. It was back in the day when we had payphones and called my answering machine at home and sang all the parts one by one into my answering machine and then went back surfing. And sure enough, by the time I got home, I'd promptly forgotten what I knew was good, but I'd forgotten it. But I hit the play button on my answering machine and I could hear like seagulls and everything, but I could hear all the parts cause I sang them all in and it triggered my memory back and I was able to write them down.

All’s well that ends well then?

It did end well. And everybody loved the theme. And that was the theme for that movie. That's to me, that's the ideal that just pops in your head.

What have been the best movies that you've worked on? What's the work you've done so far in your long career that you are most proud of?

Those are two different questions!

They are. So you answered them both in order, sir.

Well, I'll try. The best movie I've worked on. I've worked on a lot of really good movies and they tend to be the ones that nobody's ever heard of. Actually, this answers both questions. One of my favorite scores I've ever written and what I thought was a beautiful movie, was a movie called The Book of Stars and I think it played at some festivals and that was about it. And I scored the original version of it. And the producers went back in and kind of cut it up and took out some of the magic. But it's still really good.

Mary Stuart Masterson, wasn’t it?

That's the one, you've got your computer handy. Mary Stuart Masterson, Delroy Lindo

And Jena Malone?

And Jena Malone, when she was just a kid. I would say one of the best movies I've scored was Say Anything. And that was the second movie I scored and Say Anything, I'm not saying it was the best score that I've ever written. It wasn't, not that there was anything wrong with what I wrote, but that Cameron Crowe's direction and the style of the movie didn't call for the music to step out in front emotionally. So it was much more background kind of vibe stuff, which worked. I wouldn't have done it any differently, but it doesn't stand alone as music, like the music I did for Book Of Stars does. I’ve enjoyed every movie I've scored except for one and I won't name it, but I had a blast doing Queen of the Damned, that was a completely different process because they needed songs for the movie. For those of you who have not seen Queen of the Damned, basically the pitch for the movie, to me, sounds like a bad Saturday night live skit. The vampire livestock comes back to life in the present day and becomes the world's biggest rock star. That sounds like a joke.

My wife is a massive Anne Rice fan, so as you know she has the Queen of the Damned soundtrack on vinyl and plays it all the time. And yes, it does sound ridiculous. But when we were in New Orleans a couple of years ago, we literally did the sort of Anne Rice pilgrimage where you end up standing outside our house, like a groupie. So yeah, I've seen the film many times and I genuinely think the soundtrack is excellent, but like you say, it's actually what's his name? Stuart Townsend. He's the one who follows Tom cruise, doesn't he pretending to be this rockstar and he comes across quite believably, I think.

Well, there's a funny story about that. I'll talk smack about Stuart, but in a positive way, in a funny way. So I was hired along with Jonathan Davis, the singer from Korn. He and I were hired to write the songs for the movie that the vampire is going to sing. And they're featured throughout the movie. These aren't background songs, they're on-camera performances. And then we were also part of the same deal. I pitched to the director, Michael Rymer and said, we should do the score as well. So that we'll use these themes from the songs with the orchestral score. So it feels like a piece and he'd loved that idea and they bought off on it. So Jonathan Davidson and Iget to work writing the songs. We've finished the songs and they are casting the movie. The only person who was cast at the time we were hired was Aaliyah. They hadn't cast Stuart yet. They originally went out to the kid from American Beauty, Wes Bentley, and he turned it down. And Stuart became available when he, for whatever reason, was the original Aragon in Lord of the rings. He was supposed to play that part and something went south. I don't know what, but he ended up not doing it. I think they actually started filming with him or at least rehearsing and suddenly he became available and he was pitched for this. And he got hired. So John and I had written all these songs. They were already written by the time, or at least we're in the process of being written by the time Stuart was hired. And I also got the job of being musical director, which is an additional job, it's not the usual job of a composer, but Warner Brothers hired me to go to Australia where they were filming and oversee, make sure the band looked like they were actually playing the instruments. And that Stuart was actually singing the songs to make it believable, as you say. So my very first meeting with Stuart, this is me, Stuart and Michael Rymer. We'd go out to a bar in Melbourne and we're talking about it. And Stuart's first thing he said to me was, ‘I don't think these songs work’ and I'm looking at like, who the f***? All I could do to keep from coming across the table and smacking him and Michael Rymer kind of like gives me that gesture. Like, it's okay, and he's trying to calm me down. And I said, well, Stuart, the songs have already been written. More importantly, they've been approved by Warner Brothers. This was a long process that predated your involvement here. These are the songs that are going to be in the movie and he wasn't happy about it. And Michael Rymer, he's really an actor's director because he's an actor himself. He really understands the process. And he explained to him, don't worry about it. This is his process. I've seen it before, they look for the problems and they'll solve them. Just relax. It'll be fine. So I'm putting a band together and I helped Michael in the casting of the band and I'm rehearsing with the band so that they could actually play the songs, they aren't who you hear playing in the movie. It's actually session players back here in LA, but they could play it credibly enough to where they can play along. And if they're playing exactly what those guys were playing. So it looks right when we filmed it and now, Stuart's supposed to sing along too, right? So we'd have these

rehearsals scheduled at this warehouse outside Melbourne and Stuart would show up, like it's on the schedule, you have to rehearse with the band while we're setting up this other scene, whatever XYZ. So he's basically in my domain and the bands playing the songs, playing over on top of the track. Stuart would look out the window with his back to us the whole time. He never once sang along with the band at all. And I kept saying to Michael, I don't know what to do. I can't make him do this. I have no idea what's going to happen when the camera's rolling. He won't rehearse with us. He just refuses to do it. So we were really nervous. So there was a video, the first filming that we did the first time cameras rolled I think on Stuart was actually a concert video that was being filmed. It was like the bands playing live somewhere.It's like a little theater. And the bands all set up, cameras are there, the whole big production of a movie that you expect, and Stuart's in the dressing room and he's not coming out. What's going on here? What's happening? And at this point, Michael and I had become pretty good friends. And we're just looking at each other, like, it's going to be fine, It's going to be fine. And then word comes back. One of the producers says Stuart won't put on the blonde wig. What do you mean? He's blonde. That's the whole point, he refused. He thought it was stupid. And he wouldn't do it. He refused to be a blonde vampire. So at the last minute, they put on a brown wig on him and he compromised. And he was fine with that. And Michael said, fine, whatever fine. So that's how that happened for the Anne Rice fans who were horrified that the vampire Lestat had brown hair in Queen of the Damned. That's why it was an actor's choice. So he comes out on the stage. The band's all there. There's dry ice, the whole thing, lights everywhere. We have no idea what's going to happen because Stuart never rehearsed with the band and said, okay, I'm standing right next to Michael, kind of out in the theater. And he goes, okay, action. The band starts playing along with the playback track. And Stuart goes over to the microphone and right in front of us, turned into frigging Mick Jagger, just blew our minds, just killed it, absolutely frigging killed it. And he's like leaning against the bass player, doing all the rock and roll moves. He knew them all because he'd been in a band himself, but he just wouldn't show us ahead of time. So everybody's really nervous. And then when he does it, he killed it.

But isn't that discourteous though because he needlessly created anxiety in you and your colleagues by not being a team player.

Well, that's one way to look at it and I agree with you, but that's part of his process. He wants to hold that privately and then surprise everybody. I guess it kind of ties back to my thing about how I don't like to do mock-ups, I'd rather everybody be surprised when the orchestra plays it for the first time. There's magic in that moment that can only come because of that surprise. And that's what Stuart achieved by this process. So tip of the hat to him for that.

I mean, you're not just a composer though, are you? You've obviously got your interesting Woodshed. I want to talk about the Composer's Breakfast Club, an armory of harmony. But let's talk about the other musical legends that you've worked with first, like Robert Palmer, you introduced yourself with a complaint about the noise he was making?

Again, covered in my podcast, InvisibleArts.com. The first episode is telling that story. Yeah, I was recording, playing with Andrew Ridgeley, the lesser known half of Wham, the band Wham, George Michael turned out to be the bigger star of the two of them, but it was a duo. And then Andrew was working on a solo album and they hired a bunch of session players from England and LA. And were recording for tax reasons in Compass Point in The Bahamas. So I'm there and I'm in this condo and we kind of worked banker's hours. So at night I'm going to bed pretty early and I would get up really early in the morning and go snorkeling in the ocean right outside the condo. An idyllic location, incredible. And in the condo immediately next to mine, was Robert Palmer's condo, but he was out of town out of the country. He was somewhere else. And he was such a musical hero of mine, and I was so bummed that he's not there. Sometimes his engineer comes and stays there, so you might see him, bummer. So one night, Sunday, I hear music pounding through the walls, just pounding really loud, and I'm a light sleeper anyway. And it was keeping me up and it kept me up until, I don't know, two or three in the morning. And the next morning I got up and skipped my swim and I dragged myself to breakfast with all the guys in this session. And they said what happened to you? And I said, I didn't get any sleep, I guess, Eric Thorngren, Robert's engineer must have been blasting music in his condo last night. I couldn't sleep. And Andrew laughed and said that wasn't E.T. That was Robert. He came home yesterday. Holy cow! I said, well, I was going to complain but I'm not going to complain to Robert Palmer and the engineer, who's my buddy, Who's the one that got me on the sessions to start with, started razzing me, kind of like you, Paul he's English and you know a smartass! And he said 'I dare you, go ahead and write a letter of complaint to Robert Palmer.' And I looked at and said, okay, so what have I got to lose? So I've memorised this letter. I'm so proud of it. I wrote this letter, this quick letter and put it in his mail slot at Compass Point. The letter said: Dear Mr. Palmer, as a great fan of yours and a musician myself. I just want to say what a great honor it was to hear you new work in progress last night. However, I feel it needs some additional keyboards on the second verse. So if you agree, please, don't hesitate to call when you work on it again, I guarantee I'll be awake! And signed my name. And he loved that. And got the letter, called me immediately and laughed and invited me over to the condo. And he apologised profusely for keeping me up. And I apologise for the chutzpah in my letter. And that ended up with a musical collaboration. I ended up playing a bunch of stuff with Robert, most notably, the album Heavy Nova, which had the hit single 'Simply Irresistible.' And I played keys on that. So that's kind of that.

Tell us about the Composer's Breakfast Club.

I used to be part of a weekly networking breakfast called Metal, here in LA 'Media Entertainment Technology Alliance,' and kind of was inspired by the idea of people getting together without fail every Saturday morning in that case. But the group didn't speak to me for a bunch of reasons. I met a lot of really cool people there, but I thought it would be kind of fun. I had a couple of friends that we would get together with. A couple of fellow composers out here in Malibu. We would get together and have lunch once in a while. And I said, you know what? Let's make this a regular thing. And every Monday morning let's get together for breakfast. Cause I know no

composer has anything to do at eight o'clock on a Monday morning, let's just do that. And they blanched at the hour. So it compromised at nine. And we started meeting just three of us and little by little, that was eight years ago, we started inviting other friends to come join us. And it grew and it grew, we outgrew the restaurant that we were meeting in and we went to another place. We kept outgrowing the space. And now we were like 25-30 people getting together for breakfast. And every once in a while, we'd have somebody come speak to the group, just for fun. And then the little beach house, which is the Soho club here at Malibu opened up and I was a founding member of that club and persuaded the manager to let me try the breakfast club there. And it blew up immediately. As soon as we did it there, the first day we did it there we had 65 attendees and stayed that way all the way through, up until COVID hit. We would have, you spoke Paul!

I did, there were about 100 people when I spoke there, I felt like for once I was popular.

Because it was you. So we've had some amazing speakers.

And me.

Indeed, you included! And it's been really fun. So, now we have a featured speaker every week, but now because of COVID currently, we're running it on zoom, but for those of you who are listening to this, you might be surprised to learn, and it's not an exclusive club. You don't have to be a composer. You can actually just go to composer'sbreakfastclub.org and sign up and it's free, and you can join our zoom calls from wherever you are in the world every Monday morning at 9:00 AM Pacific time.

And the last question on that of course is where is my thank you card? Because basically our entire speakers for the next few weeks were provided by me.

You're quite right. And I'm still putting that together for you.

I don't believe that, I put it to you directly that that's an untruth, but we shall move on. Now tell us, last couple of questions then. Armory of Harmony, incredible initiative. Tell our listeners.

My first time in California was when my high school marching band marched in the tournament of roses parade on new year's day, my high school being from Florida. So it was a big deal and I'm playing trombone. Trombones, in case maybe some of you have noticed, trombones are always put in the front of a marching band. They're always the first rank. And that's because of the slides, you bump into people in front of you with that long slide. So trombones are always in the first rank of a typical marching band. So I'm in the front rank of the tournament of roses parade, marching

down Colorado Boulevard. And of course, California was a legendary place to be for a surfer anyway. And it's the headquarters of the music industry, really. So I knew right then and there I'm moving to California. I've got to come back and I did. But there are all these other things that happened along the line. I mean, the first mass shooting that I was aware of happened when I was a little kid before you were born. I do believe Paul. Was the University of Texas, a guy named Charles Whitman climbed up on the tower of the University of Texas with a sniper's rifle and just started killing people down below.

Jesus.

Killed I don't know how many people, I think it was 13 people or so. One of them being an unborn baby. That was the first mass shooting that I was aware of. I'm sure there've been many before, but I was a little boy and it horrified me that anybody could do that. Then the next kind of benchmark as it were, a horrible bench to mark was the Columbine shooting and the Columbine shooting was kind of the trigger point, so to speak. Where there were a lot of imitations of that moving on and people started realising, oh, you can take a gun into a school and just start shooting indiscriminately. So sick minds would go with that. And they just started, they just kept coming, kept coming one after another. And me and every other sane human on the earth is horrified, especially in the Sandy Hook shooting, which is shooting kindergarten, first graders, are you kidding me? And I'm horrified like everybody else. And then the Parkland shooting happened and Parklands, a little town north of Miami in Florida where I'm from. And one of the students murdered was the trombone player in the band.

Oh, wow.

And it, it just kind of like, okay, that's it. I can't just sit there and say, oh, this is terrible. I got to do something. Somebody's got to do something. I mean, people are trying, but all that had been happening up to that point was on one side, are gun enthusiasts with this massively powerful lobbying group called the NRA on one side and on the other side are victims and peaceniks and calming pinkos like me. And they weren't talking, nobody's coming together to come up with solutions to this problem. Everybody's saying, well the NRA's answer is, we'll arm the teachers, are you f*** kidding me? Do you really want your teacher packing a gun? I don't. I had been involved with another initiative for this orchestra in Africa, which is another story I won't get into. But as part of that, I had proposed that we start making musical instruments for this orchestra in Africa, out of weapons that had been turned in as part of the civil war in that country, which the Democratic Republic of the Congo and everybody liked that idea. And I started kind of looking at what really can you do with gunmetal? And it turns out you can do quite a bit. So that was already something I had thought about. And then when this hit, I said why am I trying to solve the problem of people dying in Africa when we've got kids being murdered in schools here in this country, and we've got a surplus of guns in this country, there are more guns than humans in the United States. I heard that there are some 360 million guns in civilian

hands, not counting military and police. There are more guns in civilian hands in the United States than there are in all of the police forces and armies in the world. That's an amazing stat. When you look at that, this country's armed to the teeth. Now it's kind of skewed quite a bit by the fact that it's not that every person in the United States has a gun or two, it's that there are a lot of people who have a lot of guns. And the gun owners are in the minority. But because they own so many guns, excuse the stat. Well, what also means is what do they really need so many guns for? And quite often they'll give them up for any number of reasons. The guns don't work very well anymore, and they just don't want them. And they do feel responsible. They don't want to put that gun back out in the circulation and know that that gun might end up being used to kill somebody. Even though that owner of that gun was the responsible gun owner is a hunter or whatever, right? So that started something in the United States where they have these gun buyback programs. Years ago they started doing this and large police departments sometimes would be part of it. You could go and say, I want to get rid of this old 22. It's rusty anyway. And they'll give you a hundred dollars gift certificate to go to Target, funny enough to buy whenever you want in exchange for turning in these guns. So I knew that these guns, there were literally tons of guns being voluntarily turned in at different departments around the country. And I came up with the idea of why don't we see if we can get those guns, get the metal from those guns. We don't want guns. We want the by-product of those guns and work with musical instrument manufacturers to make musical instruments, utilising that gunmetal, and then give those instruments to high school music programs around the country to help them out. And that was my initial idea and started recruiting other people in the industry and everybody was into it. And most interesting to me is the people who are gun owners themselves and enthusiasts loved this because we aren't talking about gun control. We aren't getting into that issue. All we really want to do is to get people talking to each other, that haven't been talking to each other and finding solutions to this problem, because even the most diehard NRA right-wing Trump supporting guy doesn't want to see people being shot in school. Of course not. Nobody wants that, maybe Ted Nugent, but nobody else. So that was the beginning of it. And it took me a minute to come up with a name for it. And I thought about the idea that it's strength through music. So strength and armory is a bastion of strength of weaponry, but in this case, it's harmony, not weaponry. So Armory of Harmony, that's how that all happened.

Richard, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you for your time.

Thank you so much. Spread the word.