

NEWSLETTER

An Entertainment Industry Organization



How to Be Desmond Child

Kevin Koloff

50th Anniversary

The President's Corner

Michael R. Morris

Last month the CCC kicked off its 50th Anniversary year with our "Annual Legal Eagles Update." Playing to a packed house and featuring Matthew Gerson and Michael Ostroff from Universal Music Group, Kent Klavens from Famous Music and the ever-popular Donald Passman, the panel provided an exceedingly thought-provoking discussion of the legal and business issues that challenge the music industry in these tumultuous times. Kudos to CCC board member Ed Arrow for his exemplary moderation.

Tonight we are proud to present an evening with Desmond Child, a multi-talented artist/songwriter/producer who has worked with such luminaries as Aerosmith, Bon Jovi, Cher and Kiss. Former CCC president Teri Nelson Carpenter will be moderating tonight's event, and we look forward to Desmond's thoughts on the artists with whom he has worked, his take on current creative challenges in the business as well as his personal and undoubtedly entertaining anecdotes.

Special thanks to CCC vice president Dan Butler for pinch-hitting for me tonight (I'll be in New Orleans at VooDoo Fest checking out Kid Rock, Beastie Boys, Sonic Youth, Velvet Revolver, etc., and will bring you back some gumbo, provided you are either a CCC member or have joined by our next meeting).

The year was 1978. I was hanging in the student lounge, when a couple came in to use the expansive floor space to practice a dance routine for an upcoming talent show of some kind. I watched as they danced, and can't remember anything about their moves, which were nothing to write home about (I'm counting on the odds of them ever reading this being pretty low).

But I was struck by one particular element of the dance routine, which I've never forgotten: the song. "Our Love Is Insane" was the first single by a brand-new act called Desmond Child and Rouge, and it was an intriguing, hooky mix of disco and rock, the likes of which I hadn't heard. I knew I was hearing something interesting and new; I didn't know that I was listening to the beginning of one of the longest and most consistently successful songwriting/producing careers ever.

As Desmond recalls it 26 years later, the first Rouge record was a natural outgrowth of his eclectic background and penchant for taking chances. Desmond and the young women of Rouge were big fans of dance music – especially the music that was prominent in the gay dance clubs Desmond frequented at the time – but they also loved artists like Laura Nyro, Bruce Springsteen and Elton John. At the time, no one was really mixing those rock/popsensibilities with dance beats. After Rouge, of course, the dam broke. Desmond convinced KISS to layer their rock n' roll sensibilities over a bed of disco beats, and came up with one of his biggest hits, "I Was Made For Lovin' You." Then Donna Summer put electric rock guitars all

over the "Bad Girls" album, and there are countless other examples that have sprung up, from the last days of disco to the twenty-first century.

Of course, that wouldn't be the last time Desmond was accused of trend-setting. Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca," co-written and produced by Desmond, is largely credited with sparking the enormous, if short-lived, Latin pop trend a few years ago.

Anyone who's ever taken a crack at songwriting (and this writer is among them) knows that to get even one hit, one time, is a damn hard thing to do – a major victory. To do it five times means you're a bona fide hit songwriter, with a real track record. Desmond Child has done it more than fifty times... in fact, he's a couple hits shy of number sixty.

I spoke with Desmond last week, about his work ethic, his longevity, his background, his passions. While I have to admit I ventured too often into the cliché (I couldn't help but ask him, "What's the secret is to having such a long career?"), fortunately, his answers were more interesting than my questions.

From our conversation, I have distilled a few rules on How To Be Desmond Child:

Rule #1: Work Really Hard – And Remember, It's All About the Follow-Through.

Desmond's work ethic, like that of most successful people, is pretty intense. It's the kind of intensity you often see in people who come from humble origins, and they don't get much more humble than Desmond Child's. His mom was a single parent, a

Cuban “who barely spoke English.” Like a child of the Great Depression, Desmond has a fear, irrational though it may seem, that he’s always one short step ahead of poverty, and has to keep running. As he puts it: “If I make the wrong moves, I’ll be back in the ghetto. I know intellectually that’s not true, but that’s how it feels sometimes. I have to recreate my career every day.”

That doesn’t just mean writing a lot of songs, and producing a lot of tracks. Desmond emphasizes the importance of follow-through: calling the artist, the label, the management, whoever, to make sure the deal gets done, make sure the right people listen to the demo, make sure the song isn’t dropped from the album after it’s recorded, etc. And no matter how successful you get, Desmond points out that rejection is part of the daily routine. You have to be driven to succeed, and to succeed as Desmond Child has, you have to be in overdrive.

He also feels, as do so many successful creative people, that some of his drive comes from overcoming adversity at different stages of his career – in particular, the reactions to his being gay. Not just other people’s reactions, but his own decision in the early days, to refrain from coming out publicly.

“I was afraid to be open about my sexuality when I was an artist,” he says. The prevalent thinking at the time was that the biggest record-buyers were female, and a successful male singer had to be “their romantic partner in some kind of dreamscape.” The androgyny of Jagger, Bowie and others was somehow dangerously attractive to women, since those stars were known to spend at least half their bedtime with members of the opposite sex. Out-and-out (no pun intended) homosexuality was different, or at least that was the perception at the time.

Coming out publicly in his artist days “could have helped me to be myself,” he concludes. It’s one of his few regrets. Like so many would-be rock stars, Desmond “really wanted to be a star. I really craved that kind of attention.” He saw rock n’ roll fame as “the ultimate American dream.”

Ironically, if not coming all the

way out as a gay man may have hurt his career as an artist, it was the opposite – his being out of the closet, at least among those who knew him – that held him back, to a degree, as a record producer. “A lot of rock bands wouldn’t accept me as a producer—it was homophobia,” he recalls. In the studio, the producer is the boss, and the straight, macho guys who made up most rock bands in the seventies and early eighties couldn’t accept a gay man as an authority figure. As a result, he was limited for a while to producing women, and “weirdos like Alice Cooper,” who were more accepting.

But while his childhood poverty and bouts with homophobia may have contributed to his drive, and even though his rock star dreams have largely eluded him (so far), don’t get the idea that Desmond Child is bitter or pissed off at anyone. The Desmond who emerged in my phone interview is self-assured, happy in his success, a family man with a permanent partner and a pair of twin toddlers, and quite comfortable in his own skin. And he’s got big plans for the future – but I’ll get to that later.

Rule #2: Take Chances, and Don’t Give a Damn About Being Cool.

Desmond’s first big success came by convincing KISS to do the rock/disco thing, and according to Desmond, it wasn’t an easy sell. To a certain extent, disco’s image has been reformed over time, but in the ’70’s, rockers laughed at disco. Desmond didn’t care; “I Was Made For Lovin’ You” felt right to him, so he persevered – and soon it felt right to millions of listeners around the world.

“Before I worked with Ricky Martin, was that cool?” asks Desmond. “I don’t think so.” He sees his work with Rouge, KISS and Martin, among others, as putting himself out on a musical limb. You can look at that music with the advantage of hindsight, and think of it as middle-of-the-road stuff, but Desmond disagrees. “I took risks,” he says. And he’s right—it’s easy to take a Reese’s cup for granted now, but the first guy to mix chocolate with peanut butter deserves major props (that’s my ana-

logy, not his), and Desmond Child has been ahead of his pop musical time more than once.

Rule #3: Be Flexible, and Go With the Musical Flow.

I ask Desmond about the difference between the artists he worked with in the early days (KISS, Aerosmith, Bon Jovi), and the ones who are on the list in 2004 (Hillary Duff, Clay Aiken). I wonder, was there more rock cred back then, or am I just being nostalgic?

He pauses, and it feels to me from the tone of his answer that he has never had reason to consider that question. “To keep working, I’ve gotten on board with whoever’s making music,” he says. “It’s kind of first come, first served. If someone comes to me, and is enthusiastic,” he’ll work with them. As soon as he says it, he realizes he’s made it sound like he’ll work with virtually anybody, and quickly corrects the misimpression: of course, there has to be a creative connection. But while he won’t work with just anyone, he will work in any style, and with any *kind* of artist, and that’s his point. He doesn’t care whether it’s a superstar or a new face (“You have to invest in new artists”), and he doesn’t worry about whether the *cognoscenti* will love Clay Aiken (see Rule #2).

Or, as Desmond puts it, “Between hip-hop and alternative, where can I go?” Obviously the answer is, to the top.

So in 2004 and beyond, where does that leave Desmond Child? Chomping at the bit, apparently. For all the pitfalls ahead, he’s enthusiastic about the future, and it sounds like he has good reason to be.

Yes, it’s true that the music industry isn’t what it used to be: album budgets are a fraction of what they used to be, and he finds himself using drum machines and sampled strings more and more often.

And like so many of us in the film and music business, he sees file-sharing of copyrighted works as theft, and is concerned about its effects on the industry. “I’m a small business owner,” he says. “The loss of protection of intellectual property rights affects my ability to do business.” He worries less about his own

Hearing Loss: Are You at Risk?

Richard Davis

situation than that of the engineers, receptionists, guitar players and others who have more and more trouble making a living in the shrinking economics of the record business. Desmond hopes that a change of administration in Washington might result in "strong, enforceable federal copyright law" that can help turn the situation around.

But despite tough times in his chosen field, his songs continue to pop up on our CD's, iPods and radios. And he's been working his ass off to branch out in a big way. Among other things, he's hoping to showcase the side of him that's more "artistic and jazzy" than the pop music he's best known for (he has a degree in classical music from NYU). Upcoming projects include:

1. A one-man show in which he'll recreate Reno Sweeney, the famous rock club where he never got to play. "Desmond Child at Reno Sweeney" will be starting its multi-city tour next spring, featuring some of his own songs, and others by some of his favorite writers, including many who are not well known.

2. A stage musical he's working on with his partner Davitt Siggerson (Desmond has wanted for a long time "to tell a story with a longer arc" than a three-minute song).

3. A reality TV show (yeah, I know, everybody has one, but after talking to Desmond, I want to see his).

4. A music-driven feature film (he won't elaborate on the idea, but it will include a lot of his '80's hits).

5. The release of a documentary, already in the can, about the birth of his twin sons through a surrogate mother.

This is obviously not a profile of a guy who's resting on his laurels. There's a lot more of Desmond Child to come, and as we have been for the last quarter of a century, we'll be watching—and listening.

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As musicians, our ears are central to our livelihood. However, many modern-day musical situations are actually damaging to our aural health. A study at the University of Tennessee found that 60% of college freshman exhibit some hearing loss. Researchers at the University of Florida found some degree of hearing loss in 17% of middle and high school students – about the same percentage to be expected in the 45-50 year old range.

Knowing what can be damaging, and knowing how to protect oneself, is crucial. So here's an interesting question: Which group has a higher incidence of hearing damage from loud music?

- A) Rock musicians
- B) Symphony orchestra musicians
- C) Heavy metal fans

Perhaps you will be as surprised as I was to find out that the answer is 'B,' symphony orchestra musicians. Studies have shown that about 37% of rock musicians have permanent hearing loss, while the same is true of over 50% of classical musicians. Common sense tells us that stacks of amps and speakers at a rock concert could be dangerous, but a symphony orchestra?

Modern instruments in a symphony orchestra have been getting louder and louder for many decades. The musicians are in close proximity to each other, and the sound is not dissipated at all, as it is in a rock concert where the speakers are on the sides of the stage. One researcher found that the decibel level at the shoulder of a flute player was 126 dB, just under the pain threshold. Other research confirms that flute and piccolo players tend to have more hearing loss in the right ears, while violinists and violists are weaker in the left ear – in both cases due to where they hold the instrument. This kind of imbalance is believed to affect the way we hear pitch and volume and could potentially create neurological problems.

Regardless of the style of music, any damage to the ear can be devastating to a musician, and is sometimes irreversible. Musicians and non-musicians experience ringing in their ears after a loud concert or a night at a dance club. This is the first sign of possibly serious hearing problems. So it

becomes extremely important to understand the dangers of noise and sound levels, as well as how to protect oneself.

When the ear is overloaded it can no longer process the auditory information coming in, and in severe cases the hearing mechanism is permanently damaged. At this point a person experiences a "threshold shift" – when the ability to hear is actually compromised. Noise-induced hearing loss, or NIHL, can be temporary or permanent depending on the volume and the length of time exposed, and the individual person. It can happen with a brief burst of sound, or over a period of time – either minutes or decades. When a threshold shift is experienced, a person starts to lose volume and clarity, beginning with the loss of high frequencies. The warning signs are ringing or buzzing in the ears, a slight muffling of sounds, difficulty understanding speech, and a hard time separating different sounds in a noisy environment such as a party. The ability to distinguish pitch can also be affected. Loud volumes are the main culprit in NIHL, but keep in mind that prolonged exposure at lower volumes can also be dangerous.

Understanding how sound works and its measurement is also important. The physics of sound is way too complex for this article, but we can begin by saying that sound is measured in decibels, or dB. This is a scientific way of measuring the varying pressure of air against the ear-drum as sound gets louder and softer. The decibel chart is exponential; every ten decibels represents a tenfold increase in volume. So 100 dB is ten times louder than 90 dB. An average conversation is between 40-50 decibels, normal piano practice is 60-80 dB, an alarm clock buzzer about 70 dB, a garbage disposal 80 dB, and a busy city street is also about 80 dB.

Above 85-90 dB is where we court potential danger. Exposure to sounds above 90 dB can cause short or long-term hearing damage depending on the length of exposure. Lawn mowers are about 90 dB, chainsaws and snowmobiles 100 dB, typical headphone use is about 110 dB, rock concerts can be anywhere from 110 to 125 dB, and a typical dance club is 120 dB. As the pain level is at 130 dB, this means we

do damage to our ears before we feel any pain.

Musicians can protect themselves from NIHL by following several precautionary steps. The first is to wear earplugs when exposed to loud volumes. This will reduce the decibel level by up to 20 dB. Foam, wax, or rubber earplugs available in a pharmacy offer some protection, but have the disadvantage of blocking high frequencies more than others, so the resulting sound is not true. The best earplugs are custom made and molded to fit each person, and are available from an audiologist. These are the most appropriate for performing musicians.

The second is to limit the time of exposure in any one sitting. That means taking a break after 20-30 minutes of loud music. Remember that the length of time you are exposed to loud sounds is a key factor in NIHL.

Finally, the best solution is to simply keep the volume down on our stereos, and especially on headphones. If you can't hear someone talking while you are listening with headphones, it is too loud. If your ears are ringing when you take off headphones, you may be causing hearing damage.

It is crucial for musicians to take care of their ears. The attitude of "It's only rock 'n roll and I like it" just doesn't wash in the face of waking up one day and not being able to hear the mix of your latest tracks. As the onset of hearing loss can creep up on you over time, it is never too early to start practicing sound health. The partial deafness of Pete Townshend and many other rock stars is testimony to the dangers of loud music. I urge every musician and music lover to purchase earplugs and start using them. Your ears will thank you.

Richard Davis is an educator, composer, orchestrator, record producer, and author. He is currently Associate Professor of Film Scoring at Berklee College of Music in Boston. Film credits include orchestrations for feature films Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves and The Last Boy Scout; ABC television show The Fall Guy; original music for Monsters, The Cyclist and others. Personal appearances as musical director or sideman include Phylcia Rashad, Betty Buckley, Lulu, Gloria Loring, John Denver, Illinois Jacquet, and Meg Christian. Richard recently authored the COMPLETE GUIDE TO FILM SCORING, The art and business of music for movies & television, published by Berklee Press and distributed by Hal Leonard Music. This article originally appeared in the Berklee Groove.

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New Media and Games

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January 18
Film and TV

February 15
An Evening with BMI

March 15
An Evening with SESAC

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