

NEIL ARGO

Exclusive interview for ScoreTrack.Net

Neil Argo is a composer, while established in television, is now making wonderful musical contributions in film. From 'The New Mission: Impossible', 'Wild America' and 'Beverly Hills 90210', to the far reaches of South African National Geographic documentaries, he has composed for many noteworthy projects. Neil's scores have involved full studio orchestras, as well as electronic synthesis. While he prefers the magnificent sound of an acoustic ensemble, he is very comfortable combining both worlds, hybrid scores, using both acoustic, electronic and sampled synthesis. In November, 2008 our associate Viviana Ferreira conducted this exclusive interview with the gentle musician.

Viviana Ferreira - Where did you born?

Neil Argo - I was born in San Diego, California. My father was a military officer, Air Force career person, so we moved away from San Diego when I was 2 years old. We moved a lot while I was growing up. (I attended 3 different high schools, for example).

VF - How did you discover that music was your passion?

NA - When I was in high school, age 15, I decided I wanted to play the drums, so my parents bought me a set of drums. I think inside of me was a grande feeling for rhythm. I played drums through high school and 4 years in the Air Force (military band) for 4 years. When I got to college, University of North Texas - Denton ,Texas, famous for jazz, I discovered that my "ears" for orchestration and melody were better than my drumming. So while I was at this University I changed my major focus and degree program to composition and quit playing drums. (I began taking piano lessons here).



Neil Argo

VF - What is your musical graduation?

NA - After 4 years in the Air Force and 5 years at the University of North Texas, (I graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Music Composition), I worked for one year and then began a Masters Degree in music theory and composition at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado.

VF - The 'Wild America' was a amazing work, what does this project mean for you?

NA - Two years after acquiring my degree, around 1981, I met John Denver and a former producer of his ABC Television Specials from the early 70's, in Aspen. This producer was planning to launch a new TV series for PBS Television, nationally called 'Wild America'. I called and called him for a year and finally her hired me to compose the theme for 'Wild America' in 1982. The series actually premiered on PBS in October 1982. I composed and recorded for the series in Denver at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts for the next 3 to 4 years. This was a good training ground to learn how to compose to film timings, to conduct to picture and to learn to compose fast.

VF - You already worked as orchestrator and conductor in TV shows like 'MacGyver', 'The New Mission: Impossible' and 'Beverly Hills 90210'. Tell us something about these experiences.

NA - I moved to Los Angeles and began to look for work as a composer or orchestrator and eventually met Rocky Moriana, Music VP at Aaron Spelling Productions which was located at Warner Hollywood at that time. I asked him if I could attend recording session for Dynasty, Hotel, the Colby's and he said yes... so I did that for 3 years. During that time one of the regular composers for the Spelling Company, John Davis, asked me to orchestrate for him, which I did. Then he referred me over to work with a colleague of his who was composing for 'MacGyver'. I orchestrated for this person, Kenny Harrison, for a couple of shows. Orchestrating for a television composer who is composing for 46 or more pieces, (no it's a lot of synthesis and sampling) but on these shows, these composers had two and 1/2 half days to compose, to picture - 23 minutes of orchestra music. So, as an orchestrator, I would get 57 measure, for example, of orchestra music composed on a grand staff by the composer, (VERY CROWEDED together notes) at 10 PM at night. The composer needed it "blown-up" on score paper for 46 pieces with all of the articulations and dynamics in the right place, ready for the copy staff by the next morning at 8 AM. So often I didn't go to sleep at night for two days at a time. At the beginning of the Writers strike in Hollywood, 1988, Paramount Television brought back the television series 'Mission: Impossible', except that this time they called it 'The New Mission: Impossible'. I was contracted by Paramount Television to compose on 25 episodes of this series over the next 2 years. In 1990 my friend and colleague, John Davis was asked to compose the theme for 'Beverly Hill's 90210', which he did and I worked on that series with him and a number of other new Spelling shows, 'Hearts Are Wild', 'Burke's Law', and so forth. (Only 'B. H. 90210' lasted a long time)

VF - You also composed for National Geographic TV Specials and Explorer series, what you can talk about these projects?

NA - In 1993, the brother of the producer for 'Wild America', Mark Stouffer, arranged to get me hired by National Geographic Television to do a new TV Special for them, called 'Survivors of the Skeleton Coast'. Out of this Special grew the opportunity to compose all of the music for 5 more one-hour programs on Africa for the BBC in London called 'Skeleton Coast Safari'. Through 1997. In 1994, the producer of an episode of National Geographic Explorer called me to compose the music for his half-hour program 'Animal Minds', which I did. Working with National Geographic as a composer is like working with any independent producer. I mean, they assign a producer to do and oversee a project and you as the composer, work with that producer alone. In the end, however, the music has to be approved by a senior producer at NGTV. But, when you compose for a one-hour National Geographic Special, it's a bigger deal. Here, you're working directly with senior editors and senior and executive producers and all decisions about the music you compose is approved immediately, (or disapproved in which case you change it immediately.) NGTV has no one composer, to my

knowledge. Many composers have composed for them over many years.

VF - You frequently work with director Russ Emanuel, how long time you know him? And how you knew him?

NA - In 2002 I met Russ Emanuel, a young director who had just graduated from USC in film and international business. He was making his first half-hour film and looking for a composer on the production-reference web-sites, (like 'LA411' or 'Mandys') He said he found my web-site, listened to my music, liked it, and wanted to meet me and interview me and 6 other composers. Three days later he called me back and said he chose me to score his first film. Over the next 4 years I scored three more short films for him. 'Mavet' - he produced, 'Girl with Gun', 'Perfect Red' he produced. Last year he directed his first feature length picture called 'P.J.' starring John Heard, Robert Picardo, Vincent Pastore, Patricia Rae and others. Both Russ and I have now done 6 pictures if you count 'Chasing the Green' feature, now in post production and starring William Devane, Ryan Hurst, Jeremy London, Heather McComb.



Neil Argo and Russ Emanuel

VF - Who is your movie composer idol?

NA - My favorite composers in cinema are [Jerry Goldsmith](#) and Michel Legrand. Michel is very very melodic. I think a melody imparts a feeling and a place better than anything else. The melody I composed for 'P.J.' imparts, I feel, a feeling of New York City and all of it's sophistication and New York city grandness.

VF - Of all your scores, which is your favourite?

NA - My favorite score is hard to say, for now, probably 'P.J.'.

VF - So, talk about your last work, 'P.J.'.

NA - I had 4 weeks to compose 50 minutes of music for 'P.J.' for orchestra. There is a clip of the recording on my web site under media/video or go to YouTube and type in Neil Argo. The day of the recording was wonderful ... All day. We recorded 50 minutes of music in 6 hours exactly, or a double session as they call it in the Musician's Union. This was an American Federation of Musicians theatrical recording. I conducted for 6 hours with a 10 minute break every hour. I had gotten only 1 and a-half hour of sleep the night before that



day. (the director, Russ, had to pick me up and drive me to the studio because I was too tired.) I was fortunate to have Mick Vaccaro contracting the orchestra because we had the concert master who was the concert master for much larger budgeted motion pictures. Kudos to Mike Vaccaro. The score for 'P.J.' has been well received and even compared to the likes of Michel Legrand which is very flattering to me.

VF – And for the future? What else we'll expect to hear from Neil Argo?

NA - *I look forward to more scores for the cinema and I'm hoping that the music from 'P.J.' will attract attention my way so that I may have more opportunities to score wonderful stories.*

VF – Well, it was a pleasure to interview you Neil, because your music is fantastic, and because you are a very intelligent and beloved score composer. Thank you very much!

NA - *Thank you Viviana. I enjoyed doing this for you and for me. Many warm blessing your way!*

Special thanks to Neil Argo for granted us with this interview. For more info about the composer, visit <http://www.neilargo.com/>

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