

ISSUE 9 WRITERS IN PROFILE AN INTERVIEW WITH NICK HUDSON

THE CREATIVE MIND BEHIND *LETTERS TO THE DEAD*



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In the latest issue of *One+One Filmmakers Journal*, Brighton-based musician and filmmaker Nick Hudson writes about the process of making his cross media project *Letters to the Dead*. The project tells the story of a bad mother's search for her lost child, a Victorian spirit medium, a seance, ocean-dwelling undead sprites and a trial, all against the backdrop of the wild and haunting English sea. It comes in various forms, it is an album, a film, a book and a live performance. In the following interview we talk to Nick about how he feels now the project is completed and explore further some of the ideas he presents in his article.

Q: Since writing about *Letters to the Dead* for *One+One* you have completed the film, the record and the live performance, how do you feel about the project now it's all over?

Predominantly relieved, and excited to have witnessed the various strands come to fruition; also astonished and flattered by the dedication everyone involved has demonstrated. The première of both film and performance went very well and were well-attended. The show itself did however pass in a blur, as we'd spent the entire day loading in, dressing the set, fixing the lights, sound-checking, etc, so come the actual performance I was too focused on ensuring everything was proceeding as it should, to really enjoy it, beyond knowing that it seemed to be doing just that! There's the libretto booklet still to attend to, and then of course shed-loads of promotion for the album itself in its various guises. We're also seeking to take the show to various art festivals across the UK and Europe, and there's tentative discussion of touring it along the West Coast of the US come summertime.

Q: In your article you talk about how important collaboration is for you, can you tell us a bit how this collaboration worked in *Letters to the Dead*, did everyone have equal creative input or was it more that people would

suggest things and you would have final say?

Sure. So, I conceived of and wrote the narrative outline and the basic musical framework myself – so all the text itself is mine, as are the compositions in their rawest state. In terms of arrangement and tonal colour, that's where the various contributors really imprinted themselves upon the work. Tim Byrnes (Kayo Dot/Hazel Rah) is an astonishing NYC-based horn player and composer to whom I gave a simple demo of 'Bad Atoms' – the overture – and he composed a five-piece horn arrangement that really illuminated the piece – and the same is pretty true of all the guest contributions – my standpoint being 'why collaborate with someone whose work you enjoy for its original voice if you're not going to permit any of that original voice to breathe within the collaboration'. So yeah, Toby Driver of Kayo Dot contributed a spidery, fractured and dissonant guitar line, intended for 'Letters Number Three', which I couldn't fathom how would layer within the track, so for that one I composed a new piece around his contribution.

In terms of the film aspect, Chris Purdie and I largely improvised the framing and angles on location – quite an urgent but intuitive dialogue developed – ultimately I ended up more directing the performers and let Chris get on with composing the shots. The performers would generate entire sequences – such as Karin's dance – the wind billowed about the diaphanous blue shawl she was wearing, and so we just pointed the camera at her on the beach and filmed her doing whatever she was doing – it's proven one of the most dynamic sequences in the work.

Q: The relationship between money and creativity is one of the chief concerns discussed in your article, you talk about an approach to making projects which works with available means and instead of payment to collaborators you exchange skills and artworks. I was wondering what your thoughts are on the relationship between money and the distribution and exhibition of your project? Will your album/film be available for free and do you charge for people to attend your screenings/concerts? If so do you think the fact that if people have exchanged money to see your work has an effect on their experience of it?

In terms of the concerts/screenings being thus-far self-produced, we obviously didn't want to actually lose money, so we sold tickets for a minimal fee – a church is an expensive venue to rent so it was essential that we cover that, plus the fee to the hired sound/lighting engineer. Everyone involved in it will obviously be given copies of the film/album/booklet when they're ready, as will everyone who participated in the Crowdfunder campaign with which we partially funded the record. If other parties/promoters decided they want to stage 'Letters...' and pay everyone, obviously that's wonderful, and indeed were we to have made a sum beyond that sufficient to cover basic venue/engineer hire costs, then I'd of course rather have paid people than not – we'd all rather have this work be our day job in a sustainable manner. And that's something I'm looking towards now – grants and trusts that may wish to invest in this kind of work and those contributing within it. In all honesty, we only just pulled off the show – it's the most logistically demanding and multi-faceted endeavour any of us have attempted to put stage – there were around thirty people involved altogether, and although I stand by my initial musings on the rather utopian idea of an economy based on skill-sharing, I obviously am not averse to the idea of this work actually constituting a source of income that can support in the sense of bills being paid. I think the skill-sharing economy can work between artists and mutual collaborators, but I see no reason why the public who interact with the art shouldn't pay to experience it – not all of the time necessarily, but certainly in situations where there are huge costs involved in presenting the art. Otherwise, we filmed the concert and have made that available for free online, and the 'Letters...' film itself comes with vinyl, and I think Chris and I would be happy to have it screened for free – as the film is an artefact, not a performance requiring thirty people to have it manifested! Also, the record will be stream-able on various Bandcamp pages. This is being released by Antithetic Records in a fairly limited edition.

Q: Tell us a little about your inspirations, what artists, filmmakers and musicians have inspired and influenced *Letters to the Dead*?

In terms of general inspiration seeping into my world-view and artistic considerations, Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Wilson and Scott Walker are true pillars within their respective media, and elements from the works of each I'm fairly certain permeated my creative process regarding 'Letters...' Obviously there are hundreds more – Meredith Monk, Peter Greenaway, Kenneth Anger, Bjork, Maya Deren, and many others.

Q: I am interested in the relationship between the various forms of *Letters to the Dead*, why was it important to for it to be a live performance, an album and a film? What was gained from each of these different incarnations that couldn't have been achieved from the others alone?

I've always made albums, and I've always performed, and albeit less frequently, I've always made films, and so I wanted to explore what would happen if one were to situate a single project across all three endeavours, and I think the relationship is one of environment – one occurs and is digested in a church, one in a cinema, and one (I'd in most cases presume) at home. The way people behave in each of these environments is quite different. Also, in terms of sheer quantity of data being transmitted, they're each very different – with the album being purely aural, aside from the artwork, the film packaging visual and audio data together, and the performance incorporating the film, staged sequences, the architectural grandeur of the performance space, and the spontaneity of improvised musical sequences. So at the most basic, each strand behaves in each own way, while still being recognisably built around a cohesive whole. I wanted to have the narrative manifest on so many levels and across so many media that an extra credibility might be lent to the story content – with the same visual and aural prompts appearing around every corner. It will also evolve – if and when we're able to summon funds for bigger sets, more lighting, etc, then the performance will expand.

Q: What projects do you have planned for 2013?

I need to complete the film-making MA I began last year. And I hope and wish to take 'Letters..' on tour, as mentioned briefly above. I've also got various collaborative EP's on the horizon. And am currently composing a score for a film by Michael Salerno, an excellent director based in Paris. This is called *Dans Le Silence* and looks to be a beautiful film.

Visit Nick Hudson's website here: <http://nickhudsonindustries.bandcamp.com>

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