

## Things You Didn't Know About

# MIRIAM CUTLER

INTERVIEWED BY LORI BARTH



*Miriam Cutler has been an SCL Board Member for over 10 years. Starting out as a musician and songwriter, going on to be a pivotal member of Danny Elfman's Mystic Nights Of The Oingo Boingo, she later moved on to scoring the music for documentaries and indie films and has continually played an important role doing workshops for The Sundance Institute. There's probably a lot of things you didn't know about Miriam, but now you will after you read this interview!*

**Score:** What's your main instrument?

**Miriam:** I started off on piano like most kids then quickly went to clarinet. Uncle George had one in the attic. I just wanted to play everything—piano, guitar, strings, horns, and of course, sing. I didn't really have a preference. From an early age I started making up music. It's always really been about writing. I write on keyboard and sometimes guitar, but I performed on vocals and clarinet for many years. I was a good musician and a good performer and I tried really hard to play bee bop but just couldn't. I knew I wasn't really a player. So I would say my main axe is writing.

**Score:** Where did you study? Where did you learn all this?

**Miriam:** I happened to luck out. As a kid, I had a really great piano teacher who was a big band trumpet player, so while my friends were all playing silly little pieces, he had me playing sonatinas, teaching me to play with cardboard covering the keys. I would make up pieces and play them for him and he encouraged me. From a very young age I played and wrote songs to get me through the day. So music has always been a huge part of my life, but I never expected to do it professionally.

**Score:** Talk about Oingo Boingo and Danny Elfman and a few of your recollections.

**Miriam:** While studying anthropology at UCLA, I'd see the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo do amazing street theater on campus. Fire breathing, acrobats, marching gorillas playing brass and drums... I became a huge fan and followed them to their other performances. Coincidentally, Steve Bartek and I lived in the same dorm

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and we played in ethnic ensembles for ethnomusicology courses together while in school. Sometime after college, Steve joined the Mystic Knights. I left grad school to become an activist and worked as a public interest investigator at a legal aid clinic. During the day I was doing my job, but at night I was playing in bands.

I had my own band called Alice Stone—an all woman theatrical ragtime band formed around the Women's Building, and the feminist art movement in the '70s in L.A. It was really fun and I was writing topical songs and arranging them for tuba, clarinet, trombone, violin, piano, banjo and drums. We were very popular, playing clubs and colleges all over the West Coast. We were one of the first bands to put out an independent record. But all this was part time. One night Brad Kay, a friend of Danny Elfman's, came to hear us. A collector of old '78s, he loved doing take-downs and was putting together a band to play them. He knew that Danny was looking for female musicians for the Mystic Knights. I was invited to a rehearsal and Steve was there. It was a great reunion! The first thing they did was put a tenor sax in my hand, I'd never even touched one, you know, I was a clarinet player. We started playing and then we sat down and played the balaphones, then gamelan. They could see I was a quick study on any instrument and had enthusiasm for music from all over the world; I was in heaven. I had a great time at the rehearsal and they asked me to join the band. When I think back, I was game for everything—especially the gorilla suits! I was with the band about three years and *loved* it. The quality of the musicianship and challenges of the show inspired me to commit to doing music full time.

From around 1975-79, we played all over the place to a large and enthusiastic fan base. Danny was very ambitious and wanted to produce an unusual and exciting stage show. So he took out a bank loan and got all these amazing artist friends to create sets and costumes and interstitial films, hired a director/choreographer, and booked the Las Palmas Theater in Hollywood. About a week before we were set to open our extravaganza we were at a rehearsal at a loft down on Washington Blvd. We took a break and everybody

said, "Let's go up on the roof and watch the sunset." We climbed up the ladder, everybody walked around this tarp and I walked onto it—and fell through the roof about 14 feet onto a concrete floor in a tool closet. What was I thinking, everybody else walked around it. Turned out there was a hole in the roof and I stepped in it. They had to call an ambulance, I couldn't move. Needless to say, Danny was freaked out because we were supposed to open so soon. We had a manager then, and she was wild and crazy about the group. She said, "You have to get up," but I couldn't move. We got to the hospital and Danny was concerned about me, but really stressed out because I was supposed to sing and/or play in almost every number.

I went home to convalesce. Our manager kept calling me saying, "You have a week to get better—you can do it in a wheelchair, you have to get up." But I still couldn't move, I had sprained my back badly. A few days later, just before opening night, I heard the Las Palmas Theater had burned down. So we were saved, but it was the beginning of a hard time for Danny and the band. We did get our theatrical runs and for the next couple of years we performed in a lot of theaters. Eventually, Danny decided to take the band in a more scaled-down '80s rock direction. That's when we parted ways. I was ready to get back to writing and performing my own music.

**Score:** You carved out a niche with festival Indies and music for documentaries. How did you do that?

**Miriam:** I made the transition from performer-songwriter to writer/producer because I wanted something more. Now I was making a living—playing in bands, writing, producing, and pitching songs, and eventually scoring low budget films, industrials, and circus. I was getting songs into movies and as the studio technology evolved it made my project studio much more professional. I was amazed when Fostex came out with an analog recording system that included full-synchronization for my home studio and it boosted my capacity to score films there.

Although things were going well, after about ten years of constant work, I began to question my direction. I

put my heart and soul into the music but too often the films weren't good. I love music but I wanted to serve some higher purpose.

The turning point came in 1997 when I met a filmmaker at one of my screenings who was making a film called *License To Kill*. When he told me that he was going into prisons and interviewing men who had murdered gay men to find out why they thought that was ok, I was floored. "OMG, I have to work on this film." He was a very respected documentary filmmaker and this was a project I could really be proud to be part of. We went to Sundance, and a whole new world opened up to me. The film won two awards, and I was introduced to this amazing community of passionate documentary filmmakers. I felt like I had finally found what I was looking for.

From then on I became very focused. I started meeting more people and I went to Sundance every year. I made it my goal to become part of the doc community, and I have. It's the kind of work I'm inspired to do and I've worked on many award-winning documentaries that I am proud of. The Sundance Institute has been a huge part of that. I go to the festival, I have films there, I'm a lab advisor, they include me in a lot of wonderful things which has led to many other amazing opportunities. I co-produced a documentary called *One Lucky Elephant* and am embarking on another later this year. Last year I was invited to join the Documentary Branch of the Motion Picture Academy, and this year I was invited into The American Film Showcase—a cultural exchange program run by the U.S. State Department and USC. They send documentary filmmakers all over the world for "people to people diplomacy." I'm off to Borneo at the end of May.

As far as ensembles—I am absolutely committed to working with live musicians. Electronics are fine if that is what you are going for, but I stopped doing midi orchestrations (except for mock-ups) a long time ago.

**Score:** How are you scoring these, small ensembles, programming? What are you asked most for?

**Miriam:** It's always different. I'm known for organic small ensemble

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scores. I start with the relationship between myself and the filmmakers, and that informs the scoring process. As far as I'm concerned, we're doing the score together. Not all filmmakers want to be that collaborative. But if they are inspired to participate, it really takes me to some new and interesting places artistically. Budgets are a challenge, and are definitely smaller than they are in television and fiction and so I've developed a way of working to maximize efficiency and instrumentation.

For this kind of work, I believe in the power of a natural, well constructed, holistic approach to the music. We collaborate to conceive it, I compose it, they approve it, the players come in and bring some quality and humanity and you get a cumulative effect of feeling in the tracks. Sometimes my mock-ups are really good, and this is a struggle because there can be pressure to save time and money. For me there is no point putting all the work into creating the score if I'm just going to record midi. It doesn't satisfy my artistic goals. I want to hear it played and I believe it's better for everyone if it's played. So I've really stuck to my guns. I've managed to figure out ways to use small ensembles and techniques to overdub to sound bigger if I need it to sound bigger. I've never had a film project writing for an orchestra. But last year I did get to hear my "Ethel" score played by an orchestra, which was very exciting.

For my purposes, small ensembles are great. I like to hear all the parts in music. Not a wall of sound washed in reverb; I like to hear all the instruments, I want to hear this violin player, hear the guitar sparkling, and so I write music with details, I mix it so I can hear the details. Documentaries are a great match for me. I have been surprised to discover that I'm a purist. I think documentaries are sort of a pure form of filmmaking in the sense that ethics are very important, content is very important, not just the film but how you got the film, how you treated people in front of and behind the camera. It's all a part of it so I feel like I share values with these filmmakers. That

includes the real, natural, emotionally performed music. That's not to say that I don't love electronics because I do in their place, but not instead of. I become obsessed with replacing every midi string, every midi piano, everything that can be real. Sometimes it's hard to hear the difference because in a film music may be mixed low. But to me there's a feel, and there's transparency in the tracks that allows the production sound, the voice over, etc. to come through naturally without complicated mixing. It's about how it feels in my gut. I rely heavily on my instincts and first reactions.

I think it's very important to teach film students how to direct composers. I want filmmakers to understand the power of a well conceived and executed score and what it can mean for their film. I really respect and admire them and believe that once they understand what we have to offer, they will benefit from a great collaboration with their composer. No more slapping music on at the end when you are out of time and out of money.

Right now I'm starting a film, they haven't even got an assembly, they have some scenes. They're very early in it. That's my favorite way to begin a project because I can start composing themes, immerse myself in the material, and give them music to temp with. I mean, right now they're temping with my music from other projects. That's hard. I want to replace that with this film's music ASAP.

The way I work is always evolving as is who I am and what I want to get out of the experience. Now that I've been doing this for many years, I'm not into wasting my time or just cranking stuff out. When you're young you want to prove what you can do like saying, "I can stay up for three nights and I can meet your deadline no matter what you throw at me and it will still be good." I'm not interested in any of that anymore. I'm interested in doing my best work, devoting my energy to things I care about and this focus has led to great outcomes. Now we're getting into the whole philosophy of how you build your career. This is what I talk to young composers about. I'm not going to teach them music theory. They already have that. We all start out as artists. Somehow we get beat up by the business, and I feel like

we have to maintain respect for our own artistry. I know I spent many years abusing mine. I cranked things out and settled for less and wore myself out believing that was the only way to have a career. Musicians are notorious for waiting for the phone to ring. But you have to create the right rings. Envision what kind of life you want to live. I mean, I don't want someone else's career—I want my career and my career has to satisfy me. So I think it's really important for people to think about that when they are starting out because no matter which career path you pick, it's all going to be hard. So pick something you actually want, otherwise when you get there, you won't be happy. All through my career I've gravitated towards what feels right. I constantly ask myself: do I feel good about what I'm doing. If I'm not feeling comfortable, it's time for a change. You have to be willing to let go of lots of things.

Now is an interesting time for me, because I feel so reflective. I always remember being young and wondering where it was all leading and would it work out. I would have hated to get here and look back and think: what did I do with my life? I think it's so important to know that someday you're going to be looking back and wondering and isn't it going to be nice if you think, "Wow, I stuck to my guns, I didn't know where I was going but I knew where I didn't want to go, and finally found what I was looking for." We live in such crazy times, things are changing so fast and no one really knows how it will all turn out anyway. Even if you follow the well-beaten path, when you "get there," there might not be any "there" there! So we must all be incredibly flexible, resilient, imaginative, and resourceful.

**Score:** Do you think we've crossed over a time when it doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman? Is it an even playing field in your opinion?

**Miriam:** It's really amazing that you are bringing this up. Laura Karpman, Lolita Ritmanis, Doreen Ringer-Ross, myself, and some others are putting together this Alliance for Woman Film Composers. We like to think that there's no longer gender stereotypes or a glass ceiling but I recently read in the trades that "a woman has more

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of a chance of being hired as a coal miner than she does as a film director." Statistics don't lie: 4% of the directors that release feature films are women, and 2% are woman composers. It's the lowest of the low so the statistics tell us that there's no diversity in terms of who's getting the major opportunities in the composing field.

**Score: Do you think that there are fewer women who think they can go for it or do you think it is discrimination?**

**Miriam:** I think there are more young women who see themselves as anything they want to be than ever before. They're ready to do it. I walked into the Alliance for Women Film Composers gathering and saw some 30 working female composers, and that's just L.A. Before this, I've known a few other women composers, but you don't really hear much about many of them. So now with this new awareness of our actual numbers, I can't help but conclude that even though there are more woman composers eager and ready to work, they are rarely hired for major films. I thought it was very interesting that when Doreen posted a group photo of that gathering on FB, we got a huge amount of attention. And recently the industry trades have been full of articles lamenting the dire lack of diversity in Hollywood. So maybe we're getting to a tipping point.

Gender bias in our profession is uncomfortable to talk about but it comes up in every interview I do, and everywhere I go people always want to talk about this. I hope we can someday level the playing field where women aren't better or worse. Let them succeed based on their talent and commitment.

**Score: We've got a lot of problems facing us now: Copyright issues, piracy of intellectual property, scoring leaving L.A. There are a lot of splinter groups such as the Council for Music Creators, the work that SCL is doing; all over the world all this buzz is happening. Do you think it will amount to anything? Do you think we can make a difference to our profession?**

**Miriam:** I think the entertainment industry is a good example of what

happens when we focus on short-term economic gain, with no regard for how this affects the long-term sustainability of a system. The SCL is taking a forward position in the ongoing global battle to protect the rights of creators. It turns out that the U.S. is actually out of step with the rest of the first world on protecting the rights of creators. Those countries already understand that to sustain a healthy marketplace, you need to ensure fair compensation and create supportive atmosphere for those who "make" the product. And with the latest news that some publishers want to pull out of the PROs and direct license, creators and PROs overseas are resisting. It's actually very exciting to see how international our community is and that together we have a much larger voice.

I think it's safe to say, the traditional ways for musicians and music creators to make a living are rapidly changing and I think that it's important for all of us who are music creators to keep bringing to the attention of the public that quality music will stop being created on a large scale if there's no way to earn a living. Eventually there will be less people that know how to do it, less people that can get it out there. We are already losing some of our best recording facilities because so much recording is being outsourced overseas. Once they are all gone, we won't be able to compete at all for that business.

But then again, with the Internet, I could write a song and put it up on YouTube and immediately have a global audience. So my expenses are a lot lower but I don't know how I would support myself, except by allowing annoying ads and getting a low-wage job at McDonalds or Walmart. We have to be more conscious of the long term and I think that needs to be the message from the music creators to the public—that they need to understand the consequences of eliminating income streams by expecting music to be free.

The music business and its revenue systems of copyright, performance royalties, recordings, broadcasts, live venues and all those things, it hasn't been perfect, but it's created a thriving musical community and a dynamic music industry for many years. Now you take that away and what would we have to replace it? You'd better have something that works. ■

# Siedah Garrett

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them from nothing: It's all organic.

I keep titles and ideas and phrases and sentences.

**Where Do You Start On The Song? The Story Behind "Man In The Mirror"**

It depends. Sometimes it just starts with the first sentence of the song like "Man In The Mirror." I was at John Beasley's house and we were in a writing session and he was on the phone and said the phrase, "The man, what man, oh the man in the mirror. Two years later I'm at Glen Ballard's house after just having had a meeting with Quincy Jones about the song that he wanted to complete Michael Jackson's "Bad" Album. I took some copious notes, went back to Glen's house and told him Quincy wants this, that and the other as far as being a pop song and not a ballad. Glen said, "Let's just see what we come up with." Glen gets up to go over to his desk to turn on the keyboard and I'm flipping through my lyric book and as he's finding chords and just finding sounds on the keyboard he just starts playing this chord (sings...) and the phrase I wrote two years ago at John Beasley's popped off the page. I started writing and I couldn't write fast enough, and in like ten or twelve minutes we had the first verse and chorus for "Man In The Mirror." It's crazy. ■

## SESAC Hosts NAB Mixer

SESAC hosted a cocktail reception at the Double Helix in Las Vegas during the 2014 National Association of Broadcasters (The NAB Show®) conference, the world's largest event covering filmed entertainment and the development, management and delivery of content across all mediums.



L-R: Dan Weniger, Brian Brasher, SESAC's Erin Collins and Veigar Margeirsson