DOCUMENTING SOUND:
An Interview with Screen Composer Trevor Coleman

Henry Johnson

Abstract

New Zealand composer Trevor Coleman has created over 70 documentary film soundtracks, primarily with Natural History New Zealand. Besides composing for film, Coleman is a pianist and trumpeter, and leader and performer for various jazz fusion bands working in and around Dunedin. The article centres on an interview that covers the composer’s background and compositional process and style.

Keywords
Trevor Coleman, documentary film, composition, New Zealand

Introduction

Over the past decade or so the field of composing for documentary films has been augmented by the highly acclaimed work of prolific composer Trevor Coleman (b. 1959). Born and based in the city of Dunedin, located in the south of New Zealand’s South Island, Coleman has now been nominated three times for an Emmy award in recognition of his contribution to composing for documentary films. This article features an interview with Coleman that focuses on his compositional background, process and style.

Since 2000, Coleman has composed or produced over 70 documentary film soundtracks working primarily with Natural History New Zealand (NHNZ). As well as composing for film, Coleman is well known as a pianist and trumpeter, and leader and member of various jazz-fusion bands working in and around Dunedin. While originally trained as a classical pianist and later as a jazz musician, Coleman completed his studies in composition at the University of Otago, and then went to Berklee College of Music in the United States of America (US) to study film scoring. For part of the 1980s and 1990s he lived in Germany, working as a composer, musical director and performer. Over the course of his career, Coleman has collaborated with and led a number of jazz-fusion and contemporary jazz groups exploring music from various cultures. Influences on his approach are widespread

1 NHNZ is a world leader of documentary films ranging from nature to science. It produces films for an international audience, collaborating with broadcasters that include Animal Planet, BSkyB, Discovery Channel, France 5, HGTV, National Geographic, NHK and TLC. The company is owned by Fox Television Studios. See http://www.nhnz.tv.
2 See a history of this college at: http://www.berklee.edu/about/history.html.
and described on his website as follows: “Finding inspiration in diversity, he is a member of a new generation of eclectic composers who is fluent in the languages of jazz, classical, contemporary, electronic and world music, often described as refreshingly unique.”

Coleman’s work has been consumed by a global audience, screening in Japan through NHK (Japan), on the Discovery channel (US), and National Geographic channel (US). He records and performs widely and prolifically mainly in New Zealand. In addition, Coleman’s scores have been nominated for several awards: in 2006 his two soundtracks for high-definition Equator: Power of an Ocean (for NHK) and Buggin with Ruud: Madagaskar (for Discovery; Animal Planet) received Emmy Award Nominations for Best Music and Sound; in 2007, his Equator: Rivers of the Sun (for NHK) attracted an Emmy Award Nomination for Best Music and Sound; and in the same year his soundtrack to Equator: Challenge of Change (for NHK) was in the final round of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival for Best Original Music Score.

The following interview with Trevor Coleman has the single aim of allowing the composer to talk about his work from three perspectives: first, background – why music? why composition?; second, compositional process; and third, compositional style. These perspectives overlap and interrelate. The semi-structured interview with open questions was conducted in Coleman’s home in Dunedin, and was recorded over an hour, then transcribed and edited. The final version was returned to Coleman to confirm that it was an accurate interview record and to approve publication of the interview and introduction. What follows is part of a story of a long and lasting engagement with sound and film, a perspective of one moment in the creative life of a New Zealand film composer whose work has been screened to a global audience.

Picture source: http://www.trevorcoolden.co.nz.

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Coleman’s Background

*Henry Johnson* (henceforth HJ): Can you tell me about your background in music? Why music? Why composition?

*Trevor Coleman* (henceforth TC): For me, I have an integrated love of music. You notice that with young kids, they just gravitate towards instruments and try and find the sound and instrument from a young age. I was one of those young kids. Whenever there was a piano or anything that made sound I would go and try and find the sound that I knew was in there, so it's a very integral part of who I am. As a musician, that's how I see it – an innate sense of musicality.

HJ: So when did composition come into all of this? I know a lot of your work is in jazz, and jazz sometimes includes composing on the spot, but when did writing music down or recording music come about for you?

TC: My approach has always been quite improvisational. When I was young my approach to learning instruments was always improvisational. Right from a young age I was trying out ideas... until I could write them down. And the first actual recorded piece of mine of a more serious nature that I can remember was from about the age of fifteen. It was a piece for brass band, for the St Kilda Brass Band, here in Dunedin. It was recorded for national radio [when he was 15], and I called it a tone poem ['Novus Deus']. I think I probably worked it out on piano, and I remember walking round at school with a manuscript book in playtimes and in the lunchtimes, with that sort of obsessiveness working on it. A friend of mine was a son of Ashley Heenan [1925-2004], the conductor and composer, and, in Wellington, we went and stayed at his place and I took the score with me. He looked it over and gave me some very valuable comments on it. Fortunately, the St Kilda Brass Band, in those days, they had regular recording sessions with Radio New Zealand, and at least once a year they would have a contract to record a program. So that piece was included in that program.

HJ: Did you learn classical piano?

TC: Yes, I learned classical piano as well. I actually bounced between classical, which I spent a year or two learning, and modern playing techniques. I then went back to classical when I found my limitations of technique and so I went back and forth taking exams up to ATCL [Associate of the Trinity College of Music, London]. At university I didn’t study piano, I studied trumpet; this was my major instrument. It’s almost been a conflicting relationship for many years as I wasn’t sure if I was a pianist or a trumpet player or both, and it’s still a bit strange in a way. I’ve come to terms with it and I’ve realised that both instruments are so unique and so valuable to me, not only as a performer, but as a composer. As a pianist, of course, you can basically be an orchestra, do a lot of work with harmony, rhythm and melody at the same time. But, to have a real innate sense of melody I find having a dedicated melody instrument like the trumpet has given me a real appreciation for the power of melody. And [it’s] also a ticket into many cultures too, because as a pianist you don’t get very far in West Africa trying to lug a piano round but, in one of many places I’ve been, having a trumpet in my pocket has meant that I could play with a lot of different musicians and experience a lot of different cultures as well.

HJ: When did you first compose for film?
TC: As far as I can remember the very first film that I wrote music for was while I was studying in Berklee College in the United States, so after I had finished my degree in classical music here at Otago University, I went on to study at Berklee, and my major there was film composition (they call it film scoring) and jazz music. For my final project I had to record the music... onto the old reel-to-reel machines. That was a dance piece and it was for harp, flute and piano. It was just a small classical ensemble.

HJ: What inspired you to go to Berklee?

TC: I would say predominantly the motivation for going to Berklee College was my new found love of jazz. I really only started studying jazz at the age of 17 or 18, and I went to Berklee when I was 20 with the express intention of deepening my education in jazz music. I presume when I was there you had to nominate a particular major and I had always been interested in music for moving images, so that’s probably what happened. I nominated film scoring as my major.

Compositional Process

HJ: Let’s move onto your compositional process. Could you talk freely about the process that you use? Is there one single process, or might you go about writing for film in different ways according to the film or the context or the music?

TC: I think what you have to be very clear about is that there are really two approaches with film music, and that’s become more and more pronounced in recent times. I will address the first one as being the more traditional one, as in you have a locked set of pictures and you have a discussion about what the music is supposed to do for the scene and you write to that scene. So the architecture of your music has to lock in perfectly with the timing of the pictures. That’s one process.

The other process, which has become much more popular in recent times, is when you're more likely to write to a brief. The film is about this and that, or has a certain character. We need a set of pieces first of all, almost like demos or sketches of music that happens before the pictures are actually edited. So it’s almost like writing in the dark in a way, or writing to adjectives. For that scenario I would be talking to the director, producer, and looking for these kinds of adjectives; you know, this person has a disturbing wish, or is in the outback, it is absolutely desolate and arid; these sorts of words that I’ll be jotting down, desolate and arid, and I’ll be thinking these will be my templates in a way. I have to be able to sit back and say, ‘is this music desolate and arid?’, or am I getting carried away with the musical process of it, and the intellectual concepts that I’m trying to pursue here. At any one point, if I ask my wife to come into the room and say what it sounds like to her, and she says it sounds like a day at the swimming pool, then I’m kind of off-track.

HJ: So with the latter style of composition you’re writing to words, or adjectives; you’re given a set of concepts. Would you then take it back to the producer and say, here you go, here’s a sketch, what do you think about this?

TC: That’s exactly what happens. It’s so subjective, and so abstract working like that. It’s a very abstract concept and what happy or sad means to one person can...
be completely different music to someone else. There’s a certain amount of research, I think, and a certain amount of almost tricks or (sort of) wisdom that you pick up over the years of doing it. Sometimes I ask a producer, well have you got any particular music in mind that you’re thinking of, or something that inspires you at the moment, in order to get close to what that core sound might be. Other factors come into play when you’re working in a commercial field, as opposed to independent filmmakers. For example, if it’s Discovery or National Geographic, there are certain stylistic parameters to keep in mind. If you go too far outside of that, you’ll probably get rejected.

HJ: So you’re given a brief before you see anything?

TC: Yes. The younger editors coming through are so used to actually cutting the pictures to existing music. They tend to prefer to have music to either cut directly to, or at least act as an inspiration – something that can help them have a sense of time. And the various people involved (people who have a say in the matter) want to hear what the finished product might sound like.

But, you know, I’ve heard of producers who go through three or four composers – actually engage them – before they find the right person. Until you’re working in the field, people don’t realise what a particular art it is to write music and what a huge difference it can make from one piece of music to another piece of music; even subtle differences that are conveyed in the particular scene. Directors can be extremely fussy that they are getting exactly the right mood out of the music, providing exactly the right role, and the right function.

HJ: Do you do a few sketches and take them back to the director or producer?

TC: Yes. In the documentary process they tend to be called producer. I’ll need to mostly concentrate on the documentary world, because they [film making and documentary film making] are different worlds, and I’ve had more experience in documentary film scoring.

HJ: So you take the sketches back to the producer and say, “so what do you think of this?” And there’s a negotiation process that goes on. But do you think that helps you, as a composer, get an idea of what the producer actually wants? Do you think it helps to know the concepts in the first instance and then see the images? And you can make changes. Or will you then see the images and keep the sounds as they are?

TC: There’re so many things involved in this. I would have to say I find it helpful to have the second process, to actually not be too fixed on the moving images; to not be too fixed on a particular scene. I find it helpful to work from a wider perspective. Take the project I’m working on at the moment. It’s called Weird Edens [for NHK and Discovery]. It’s a project that’s going to take one year, and it’s a big blue chip series with NHK, with the Japanese broadcasting company, and it’s a follow on from the last series we did, the Equator series. I’m at the very beginning point, which I really enjoy because I’m working far more conceptually and I have the opportunity to write something a little more unique, or fresh, or try and come up with something I haven’t come up with before. One of the briefs that I’ve had for this show, apart from all the discussions we’ve had, is that the executive producer, who has quite a say, was saying basically we need a score that will sound contemporary, and between the years 2011 and 2013.
This is the kind of thinking that goes on within the corporations. It will be mainly broadcast between the years 2011 and 2015. The score can't sound dated, so in a way, you put on your prophecy hat, wizard hat, and try and see in the future, about the sort of sound that will still sound contemporary. Sounding contemporary is also a part of the process.

HJ: Have you ever worked with the concepts, done your sketches, negotiated the process, felt really good about it, and then seen the images and thought, I don’t want my music to go to those images? In other words, recompose the music for the images because you didn’t feel good about the sounds and images.

TC: In this kind of field that I’m working in, I can make my suggestions, but ultimately the decision comes from other people: from producers, executive producers. If they say that they really like this particular thing, and I think it’s mediocre, then I need to find the best way possible to make that still something that I can stand behind. But that quite often happens, in exactly the same way that the opposite also happens.

HJ: Do you ever keep that music for something else?

TC: I do. It’s not all lost. The most recent example was working for a shark documentary called *Shark Nicole*, a great white pointer. I was completely on board with the producer of the show; we were working very closely and he wanted something that was not typical of the *Jaws* [Steven Spielberg, 1975, original music by John Williams] genre because the science and the approach to this shark film was completely different. It had nothing to do with the shark as an evil eating machine. So we came up with basically chamber music, and very piano driven, quite gentle music. But the executive people, in this case it was National Geographic, they kind of played along, but they weren’t sure, and two weeks before I had to deliver the music, they pulled the plug and said no, we can’t go this way, we need traditional, cinematic, orchestral dramatic music — not so much the danger sort of *Jaws’* thing, but very traditional giant orchestral things that we were trying to avoid. So I had two weeks to come up with a complete orchestral score, forty minutes worth. This is the sort of thing that happens. It’s not always exactly what you would want. You are part of a team, and you’re a part of a bigger picture. And so you do need to be a team player.

HJ: As part of the process, could you just mention briefly some of the equipment you use?

TC: My sequencing program, which is the central brains of what I do technically, is Logic. I’m still working with Logic Pro 7. I have worked with this software since the late 1980s. I’ve grown up with Logic, and all the various plug-ins and samplers that are integrated with Logic, and the sample libraries that you have access to as a composer.

HJ: So the documentary would come on a DVD? Or would you download it or something else?

TC: The documentary is given to me as a QuickTime file. If it’s coming from another part of the world, then I’ll download it. If from here then I might get it on DVD. I can synchronise it completely to my sequencer.

HJ: And is everything keyboard-based?
TC: In terms of playing the notes, I do everything from the keyboard. But I do record acoustic instruments as well. You see a trumpet there [in the studio], but I’ll bring in people like guitarists, mandolin players, a violinist, or a soprano sax player. I really like to record vocalists.

HJ: So you record them in here [Coleman’s studio looking out at the beach]?

TC: I do, I have done. They just record straight into Logic. Once I close off everything here, it’s quite quiet. The environment plays a big role. I have good experiences with people coming into this room, and they’ve got the view of the sea, the sun is coming in, and we’re sitting here relaxed, we have a cup of tea, and when we’re ready, we get up and record. It’s not the pressure of an expensive studio, and so we get good performances.

One other thing I didn’t mention is that there is quite a lot of overlap as well. Rather than just start writing from scratch, I will take existing sketches that the editors and producers have already laid into the film, and use that as my basis to start the scoring. I’ll start scoring based upon the ideas that have already been accepted. So that way, I can’t really go wrong from that point on because the music has already been, what we call, ‘signed off’; everybody is happy with the music. At this point now, one term is ‘massaging’, you dive back into the music, and re-compose the music, based upon the ideas, the existing ideas, to the now locked pictures to make it a perfect match.

I would say I have a very improvisational, real-time approach to composition. I don’t so much (almost never) sit down and write one note after another. Anything that I come up with is basically in real-time, and typically that means if I’m working in my studio and I’ve got my sequencer running, after I’ve thought about what I want to do and found a couple of instruments that I’m interested in working with, I just start improvising, and I record everything. Then it’s a process of selection. Ninety, ninety-five percent will be thrown away, but that five to ten percent, or maybe even just one little idea that comes out of that improvisation, has a special quality to it. It’s really expressing something I’ll pursue, so once I’ve found what I call the golden idea, I will start using compositional techniques, such as repeating motives and varying the intervals, all manner of compositional techniques, and turn it into a composition. Once that’s in place, then I’ll start adding other instruments, but again, from an improvisational point of view.

It’s always improvisational. I look for ideas sometimes from all sorts of different things, and I might have recordings of all sorts of strange sounds lying around. It might be an ashtray falling on a concrete floor and going [makes sounds], anything like that. And there’s something about that, and I’ll take that rhythm, and I’ll take that sound, and start playing, put it into a loop, and start playing to that particular sound.

HJ: Could you take two or three of your documentaries that you’ve made music for and just say what stands out for you?

TC: There’s the Equator series. There’s the one about the Amazon [Rivers of the Sun, 2005, for NHK]. Or the one that takes place in Borneo in the rainforest. Those are a couple of my favourites... interesting compositional processes that have found acceptance within the context of the film. Those are the more orchestral pieces that
I feel good about. I’m quite proud of those. *Rivers of the Sun* was one that was nominated for an Emmy award for best music and sound in 2007.

Then there’s another series in a completely different style, *Buggin with Ruud: Madagaskar* (2005) [for Discovery; Animal Planet]. That is very eclectic. It’s like avant-garde music, and I had a very interesting process with one of the executives from Animal Planet from Washington. He came over, and he’s very interested in black funk music from the 1970s, and he gave me a whole lot of music from that time. “I want the whole score just funk music,” he said. And there were thirteen, one-hour programs [episodes]. We got through one program and then he said, “We’re going to have to vary it a bit…” From that, it turned into all these kind of... avant-garde, very surreal pieces. So I’m really happy with a lot of those things. A lot of it is a quite funky, electronic, avant-garde, sort of sound, and I find them fascinating. I think they work a treat.

Reaching back, there’s one score I’ve always really liked, which was for a program called *Tarsiers* (2002) [for National Geographic]. It was in the Philippines, and it’s this little marsupial that looks like a little koala in a way, so it’s a strange animal and it’s very hard to photograph. It was a unique and interesting-sounding score that used some instruments from that area [small gong, reeds, flutes as well as guitar sounds], even mixed in with some of the Spanish influence of that region. I can’t really describe what it is, but it maintains a very individual sound, which is what I always attempt to do, and I think it succeeded in that film.

**Compositional Style**

HJ: Can you say anything about your own compositional style?

TC: When you ask composers to describe their own personal style it’s very difficult. I can only say that other people who know my music (for example, in the building at Natural History) will tell me that they recognise my particular stuff straight away. They’ll be able to say they can identify it even if they haven’t heard that particular piece before. I find that surprising. You think film music all sounds pretty similar but there must be some quality in there that is identifiable. I can’t put it into words. The only sort of word that I can use is ... perhaps I have a pretty open approach musically. It’s quite often polyphonic, which is a compositional approach that I use wherever possible. Something else I’m fascinated with is polycyclic music, as opposed to polyphonic. I will have different elements in different time schemes working with or against each other.

I suppose you might get a sense of polycycles when listening to the minimalists, you know, Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Terry Riley is another one. Where you’ve got these repeating motifs, and coming in at different times and interrelating in different ways, there is a polycyclic quality to a lot of that music. It’s something that I learned when I studied and played with a musician from New York who worked very much in this way, but in the context of jazz music. He would have five or six people in this group, and five or six different timeframes that we would be working with. Over in Germany I was fascinated with how that could work not only from an intellectual perspective – because it can very quickly sound extremely intellectual and inaccessible to most people – but also in an organic, coherent kind of way.
A typical standard polycycle that I might work with would be a three, four, five polycycle; and after 60 beats all the cycles will reach the same point again. Coming up with a polycycle that doesn’t sound chaotic is quite challenging. It opens up, makes the piece sound quite expansive, and you move away from any defined sense of 1, 2, 3, 4/1, 2, 3, 4/1, 2, 3/1, 2, 3 as you would if you had everybody playing in the same time, and that fascinates me, it really does, and that’s something I’ve been working with for a lot of years.

HJ: Where in your documentaries, or any other works of yours, can we hear these polycycles?

TC: I would say it’s mostly just sprinklings of polycyclic composition so far but quite often. One of my intentions, in terms of writing orchestrally, is to have an orchestra or an ensemble divided up into three groups, with three conductors, and each ensemble works in their own timeframe. But it’s fairly new territory, and I’ve worked in jazz ensembles with polycycles too but where I’m living at the moment, I’ve found it very difficult to find people who are interested in pursuing that.

HJ: I know you’re musically eclectic, but could you point to styles of music you’ve been influenced by?

TC: There’re so many. Generally, we can break it down into ethnicities. World music has had a huge influence on me and I have spent a lot of time listening to the music from West Africa, as I have with Afro-Cuban music.

HJ: You spent some time in Cuba, didn’t you?

TC: Yes. Generally speaking, music from different parts of the world has had a huge influence on me. Stylistically, there’s jazz music, which has had an enormous impact on me. In my film composition work [jazz] almost never comes to expression because film music works with associations and if you have something that’s sort of typically jazz then, for a lot of people, the association becomes something visual, like a jazz bar or a nightclub or some urban setting. So it’s a little restricted how you can use more typical sounding jazz music. There are also Western art music composers, and so many have influenced me.

Improvisation attracted me to jazz music: this meeting of two giant cultures, Africa meets Europe, and how that music comes together, and how that is developed over time. The music that happens in Cuba is similar: the meeting between Spanish and French, with what the slaves brought over from Africa; the African rhythms and approach to playing, again, it’s how those two musics relate. I have to say, one thing I love about that music is the joy, the happiness, and it’s something you don’t always find in more strictly Western classical music... a joy of living. I must say that really attracted me to be in an environment where music played a big role in making people feel good, you know, really happy.

Growing up with Western Classical and what you call more serious jazz music... what I really enjoy about the African influence is that it really makes your body want to move and makes you want to be joyful. I’m European, I love the European music tradition, and I’ve learnt all about that; and I love African-related rhythms, and so when those two meet, whether it be jazz or Afro-Cuban music, there is something very electric that happens, which really excites me.
HJ: You’ve mentioned Cuba, Africa and Europe. Is there place and identity in your music? Can we find New Zealand in your sound? Can we find Dunedin in your sounds?

TC: I would love to be patriotic and say, well, I look out over Mount so and so and I get this inspiration, and I’ve been studying various M ori instruments and so forth, and it would all sound good and I would probably get a lot more grants... [but] my musical tastes are very global. I just enjoy music from a lot of different places. I enjoy some New Zealand composers. The only thing that I can say about this is that when I’ve been in other places (I spent many years in Europe) some people have commented on a quality of my music that has a spaciousness, or a calm, that they attribute to me being a New Zealander. They say, oh there’s this New Zealand guy, he’s kind of laid back, seems to be pretty calm, that must be a result of him growing up in New Zealand. I’m not convinced that’s true but, again, I can only say from the outside, people have identified my music as having a certain quality that seems to be coming from somewhere else, that seems to be coming from somewhere of a calmer nature than that of the frenetic pace you might get in other parts of the world.

HJ: Do you get inspiration from other cultures, other types of music here in Dunedin?

TC: Yes, I do. The best example of that would be the collaboration I’ve had with a percussionist from Peru who did a lot towards teaching me about Afro-Cuban music and Latin rhythms. I’ve had some interaction with the gamelan people, and with folk musicians. I’ve even played with Song-Bong [djembe group].

Conclusion

Based on three broad and open-ended topics, this interview has shown some of the underpinning processes that have influenced Coleman and provide insight into how and why he composes as he does. Coleman notes that his compositional approach has always been improvisational. As a trumpet player and classically trained pianist, he moved into the field of jazz and improvisation early on in his career. He studied at Berklee College of Music in the United States and soon embarked on an international career that took him first to Europe and later back to Dunedin to work for Natural History New Zealand (NHNZ). As an improviser, he applies this compositional process to the field of film music, and produces a unique style of music that is easily recognised by those working with him.

Coleman works at the keyboard when composing documentary film music. His method of composition involves writing to a brief given to him by the producer in a process that allows him the opportunity of working conceptually and composing something unique. Rather than notating a piece of music, he looks for ideas through improvisation. Stylistically, Coleman’s music shows an eclecticism that draws from a fascination with many musical traditions. He stresses his passion for Afro-Cuban music, but also notes a love of European classical traditions.

An understanding of the background, compositional process and style of a documentary film music composer provides insight not only to the musician, but also to the genre per se. Based in the south of New Zealand, Trevor Coleman’s work has been recognised in terms of its quality not only in his own country but also internationally via a global audience. His outputs emanating from the
documentaries produced by Natural History New Zealand and elsewhere show a composer who is inspired by jazz and related Afro-Cuban sounds, grounds his music in an improvisational process, and offers a unique and eclectic compositional style.