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Jim Jarmusch and Carter Logan on Their Surreal Soundscapes for Man Ray's Silent Films

Jarmusch and Logan's SQÜRL — which they describe as an “enthusiastically marginal rock band” — weaves a trippy musical accompaniment to four silent films by Man Ray.

Robert Archambeau



Jim Jarmusch at the Art Institute of Chicago (image courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago)

CHICAGO — On the evening of Super Bowl Sunday a packed house was gathered in the Art Institute of Chicago's Rubloff Auditorium to see the musical duo SQÜRL, whose members, Jim Jarmusch and Carter Logan, describe it as an “enthusiastically marginal rock band.” The occasion was the screening of four silent films by Man Ray with musical accompaniment. Jarmusch and Logan wove a trippy texture of tape loops, drums, and fuzzy guitar beneath a projection of many Ray's *L'Etoile De Mer* (1928), *Emak Bakia* (1926), *Retour a la Raison* (1923), and *Les Mysteres Du Chateau Du De* (1929). The next day, Jarmusch and Logan spoke about the experience, first under a large Picabia tucked away in a top-floor gallery of the Art Institute and, later, in a car on the way to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for the next performance in a tour that has taken them to Bloomington, Indiana, San Francisco, and Minneapolis.

Robert Archambeau: *What drew you to those Man Ray films from the '20s?*

Carter Logan: There are moments in those films that are very narrative, but others that are more purely about image, that invite you to step in and make your own interpretation, possibly in music. In music what Jim and I gravitate toward is texture — that’s what speaks to us more than other elements, so when we work with [films by] Man Ray we respond at the level of texture.

Jim Jarmusch: We coordinate some things, like which sound loops are in play, what instruments we’re using at certain points, and we know when we’ll be shifting together — some of the shifts are worked out precisely, some are freer, so we can play off each other and react to what is happening in the film in real time. We shift in rhythm or into a shared key, while at other times we’re working with dissonance. We also have to consider the acoustics of the space. I like distortion and dirt, I like reverb and delay, and a lot of how that plays out depends on the room.

CL: Making music is a matter of immediacy, as opposed to filmmaking. We can make something in the moment.

JJ: I always envied how Tom Waits could just walk over to a piano and bang out something incredible. Music is more immediate than filmmaking. I’m always making poems, music, collages. People know movies, though, so they know my films, and think the other stuff is ancillary. But I’m not a professional filmmaker — that’s why I don’t go to Hollywood.

RA: *What does it mean, not being a professional?*

JJ: It’s not about not being an expert; it’s about being an amateur. The word comes from the Latin for love and I consider myself a lover of things, of forms especially. For me a “professional” is concerned with success, and what I’m interested in isn’t success, but love.

RA: *Man Ray clearly loved what he could do with film. Was it Man Ray’s sense of discovery that took hold of you — how he was just discovering what film was capable of?*

JJ: I was thinking about making music to go with a Jean Renoir film. Renoir’s great, but the work was just too narrative for me to work with at that point. You know, I’m not an experimental filmmaker; despite what the critics say, I’m a fairly conservative filmmaker — there is narrative in my movies. But Man Ray’s exciting for how he’ll treat the camera like a toy, aim it at some piece of warped glass or drag it outside the window. Man Ray is always moving — he’s moving between genres and types of art, between high art and commercial art ...

CL: He was the chief photographer for Vogue, at the apex of commercial photography.

JJ: He was, but Man Ray was anti-hierarchical, like Dada. The Dadaists loved cartoons but they also loved old masters. Hierarchical culture is meaningless. If it moves you, it is meaningful. Man Ray is also literally into motion: he loves spirals and turning objects and how forms look when they move in three dimensions.

RA: *So that was the start of the Man Ray project?*

JJ: It was a friend’s teenage daughter who suggested not doing Renoir. Teens are always great guides to art because they’re always incredibly desperate to be part of something new, and in that sense they’re important for us. Think of Mary Shelley, think of Joan of Arc, think of Greta Thunberg.



Carter Logan at the Art Institute of Chicago (image courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago)

RA: *Some of Man Ray's films are already collaborations with other creative people, like L'Etoile De Mer, which works with a Robert Desnos poem.*

JJ: You know the Surrealists had this wonderful game called "exquisite corpse," where one person would write something or draw something and the next person would add onto it without knowing what it was. They were all about those kinds of games, and that kind of working-together.

RA: *The idea of the game seems important to you.*

JJ: I'm not a big game player in the sense of being into board games or sports. I'll play cards sometimes. But there was a French literary group called Oulipo I really like, which was interested in the idea of setting up a rule for writing and seeing what happened with it. Or there are Brian Eno's "Oblique Strategies," a set of cards with instructions on them for how to proceed with your music. This is the kind of game idea I like.

RA: *Is that a part of the process for making music or film for you?*

JJ: I'm very intuitive. I'm not analytic. If people ask me what something I've made means and I know the answer, I feel like I've failed. When I get into the editing phase, I've learned to let the film tell me what it wants to do. It took me a long time to get there, and not tell the film, "no, this is what you should be doing." I'm intuitive, and my religion is that of the imagination. When you believe in that, no one can take it away from you.