

**040 — YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN**

With *Roma*, Alfonso Cuarón uses cutting-edge technology—and the finest in old-school cinematography—to re-create the Mexico City of his childhood. The Oscar-winning director talks with Matt Prigge about his highly acclaimed new film.

**050 — I SEE A DARKNESS**

Director Karyn Kusama talks with Jim Hemphill about her masterful sunlit noir, the Nicole Kidman-starring *Destroyer*.

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*THE PRESENT  
MOMENT*

**SAM GREEN TALKS TO SCOTT MACAULAY ABOUT THE STAGING, AESTHETICS AND PHILOSOPHY OF HIS NEW "LIVE THEATER" COLLABORATION WITH JOE BINI AND SUBJECTS THE KRONOS QUARTET, A THOUSAND THOUGHTS.**

There's a sequence early in *A Thousand Thoughts*, Sam Green and Joe Bini's "live documentary" about the Bay Area musicians, the Kronos Quartet, that may seem familiar to anyone who has watched a music biopic. Scored to the ticking of a metronome, it's a "rise to fame" montage of newspaper headlines, all taken from the years in which Kronos were becoming new music superstars. On top of each article, the bold-faced type indulges in the same wordplay, a riff on the Greek meaning of the group's moniker: Kronos's "time is now," one reads; the group has hit "the big time"; they play "music for our times."

Standing next to the Kronos Quartet, stage left, with the documentary portion of the work projected on a screen behind them, Green leans into the joke. Yes, the Kronos Quartet was and still is "music for our times"—after all, they built their career by not just playing repertory work but by commissioning new pieces from composers such as Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson and Missy Mazzoli. But, in the 1980s, as the headline/photo juxtapositions make clear, they are "of the time" in another way: They're wearing wraparound new wave shades! The cellist has spiky hair!

Green gets a laugh here at the obvious journalistic puns, as well as from cringe-inducing publicity photos, projected while the older, more soberly presented Kronos sit quietly, staring into the audience. But then the metronome stops ticking, the band begins to play ("Pinched," a 2014 piece by Ryan Brown) and the VHi moment passes. Green and the group go back to what this work is really about. Yes, it's a celebration of a modern music treasure just past its 40th anniversary, but, as Green says in our discussion below, it's also a work about ephemerality and impermanence; about memory, historical and personal; about death and art's attempt to defy it. And it's about utopia, or what Fredric Jameson terms "the desire called utopia"—a subject that winds through much of Green's work, from his Oscar-nominated 2002 documentary, *The Weather Underground*, to his more recent performance/film hybrids like 2010's *Utopia in Four Movements*. "I realized I could use [the Kronos Quartet's] story to be about bigger ideas, and that's the way it wouldn't be a tribute film," says Green. "And so it was a matter of trying to work in ideas that would fit into the context of their story and make their story meaningful, and then their story would make these ideas meaningful."

If Green's earlier *Utopia* was a more bare-bones affair—the images were powered by Keynote—*A Thousand Thoughts* is expansive while not abandoning the charming, handmade quality characteristic of the director's work. Archival footage sequences are triggered by a memory—Kronos founder David Harrington recalling old Kodak ads in *Reader's Digest* and stealing the group's opening "K" from them; Green summoning up the look of '70s New York by cutting to scenes from Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*. There are stunning moments of interplay between film and performance that are an outgrowth of Green and Bini's deep contemplation of their work's unique hybrid form. Indeed, *we saw something* is what everyone thought as we streamed out of the Egyptian Theatre at the work's Sundance premiere last January. It's something you might think to yourself after any well-received festival debut, but, at Sundance, all of us meant it for real. *A Thousand Thoughts* would be performed again—it just played LA at the Ace Hotel Theatre, travels to Austin at Texas Performing Arts in March, and then arrives at New York's Town Hall in April—but it will never really be documented, and each night is its own beautiful creation. And it's our understanding of why that is and why that's important now that may be the work's true subject.





**SAM GREEN**



I'm always fascinated by a filmmaker's self-imposed rules, and I'm wondering whether you had some on this project. For example, it's clear that the interviews are about the past, and they play on a screen that's on a different spatial plane than the present, which is the music played live on stage. I don't think, for example, that anyone on stage talks other than you. No one from Kronos is answering your questions live. And then there are certain tropes of this genre that you seemed intent on avoiding or even defying. For example, I think it's a full 17 minutes into the piece before you deliver what I might call a "VH1 moment," when David Harrington talks about hearing George Crumb's "Black Angels" on the radio and deciding that he needs to form a group to play it.

— That was sort of the parameters of it—to really avoid all the formulas of a music documentary. The other one was not to have any experts or commentators. Everybody is organically involved in this story. There's no musicologist or historian of music—I always find that that removes things one step. About those 17 minutes—there's so much other material you discuss during this period: Thomas Edison; "The Lost Chord," a song written by Arthur Sullivan; Chantal Akerman and her film *News from Home*. It's like we show up to see a piece about the Kronos Quartet and you take us on a little excursion before we get there. How did some of these elements

make it into this first section of the work?

— You asked about the rules, and our main rule—I never really thought of it as a rule but as an imperative—was to not make a tribute film. That was totally uninteresting to me and to [Kronos], too. And so early on, I realized I could use their story to be about bigger ideas, and that's the way it wouldn't be a tribute film. And so, it was a matter of trying to work in ideas that would fit into the context of their story and make their story meaningful, and then their story would make these ideas meaningful. A lot of that came from sitting around with Joe Bini and me saying, "Oh, I read this thing about 'The Lost Chord.' Can we work that in there?" Just honing these other ideas. Edison's "Last Breath"—I've wanted for years to work that into something. Chantal Akerman came about because of the difficulty of evoking the '70s. It's such a visually clichéd time. So, in the writing and the editing that Joe and I did together, different things came and went.

**One of the things that surprised me is you didn't actually know a lot about the Kronos Quartet going into this, but you were attracted to the idea that they had an archive. What did you imagine would be in a musical group's archive that you would find fascinating?**

— Janet [Cowperthwaite], Kronos's manager, reached out to me out of the blue. We have a mutual friend, and she wanted someone to make a historical video, a five-minute video they

could show at Carnegie Hall before their 40th anniversary show. I'd never had a Kronos record, and I'd never seen them, but I certainly knew who they were. It didn't pay that much, but she said, "We have this archive," and literally based on that I was curious. I didn't know what they would have, and I just had a good time looking through it. And I listened to all their records. I read a huge interview that the UC Berkeley Oral History [Center] had done with David Harrington. Any time he mentioned a piece of music I would find it on YouTube and listen to it. And it was so interesting because just that little bit of context made all this music I'd never heard of so much more meaningful. In a way, that was the real spark of the piece because I realized if I could just talk a little before their pieces of music, people who didn't know their work would get a lot more out of it.

**You capture a resistance in them to being periodized, or historicized, which becomes, in a way, what the piece is about. There's a kind of paradoxical quality to it. On the one hand, it is a celebration of a group that just had a 40th anniversary, which is a milestone moment. At the same time, it's done in a form that resists posterity.**

— [laughs] It's true. Which is sort of dumb, in a way, because if you're a filmmaker, you want people to watch your stuff. But it's intentional, and I don't know how to resolve that. I mean, people often ask, "Are you going to film it ever?" It doesn't work, though, to put a camera in the back of the room. It would have to be like *An Inconvenient Truth*, which was someone taking a live performance and making something else out of it.

**In terms of the filmmaking, and as compared to your previous work, what were some of your intentions going into this piece in terms of directing and visual design?**

— Well, I have learned filmmaking as I have gone along. In some of my early films, like *The Weather Underground*, the interviews are all different, and that shows a lack of a cohesive aesthetic vision going in. I really wanted this to have that, and working with KJ [cinematographer Kirsten Johnson] was great because we sat down and figured out how things should look, and then we really tried to stick with that.

**Throughout the film, but in the first part particularly, the interviews almost feel like they are done via webcam. They're obviously not—they look much better!—but they have that feeling. And you're using your laptop on stage, so you've set up this idea of digital communication.**

— Someone after a show said that to me: "It's amazing you had all those people on Skype! [laughs]" But it is a wide lens, and [the interviewees] are sitting close and looking right into it. I like wide lenses because you can have both an intimacy with a person's face and also get a sense of space, too. It's not claustrophobic. I like the idea of people looking at the lens. Of course, Errol Morris is the godfather of that.

**Here the people are situated much closer to the lens than in his films.**

— Right. Super close. They would end up being a foot away from the lens. It was weird, but people can do it.

**Did you use an Intertron?**

— We did. It's a very homemade one—there's a teleprompter over the lens, with my face projected on it, with mirrors. It would just barely work every time. KJ was insane for putting up with us doing that.

**You also have these moments that are very self-consciously "live" moments — they wouldn't work just on film.**

— The John Cage thing.

**Yes. And then the final sequence, with them just playing, and us appreciating the experience of that. This is all very interesting to me because I was the programming director of The Kitchen for five years, producing live performance and theater and some music. Some of the best things I ever produced were totally ephemeral. If you Google them you'll come up with nothing. By the time I left, I was frustrated by the impermanence of it all, and I think that motivated me to want to produce film. But now, after producing a lot of film, I very much connect with what you are doing.**

— Because the world's the opposite, in a way. Everything's documented.

**But did Kronos ever express a desire for this work to be in a form that could more easily live outside of live performance? That could be less ephemeral?**

— No. At least I've never heard them say that. They're pretty thrilled with it, and I think the ephemeral nature appeals to them because they're musicians and ephemerality is at the heart of what they do. They're not super careerists in terms of, "If we had a movie that was around, x number of people would be seeing it." They don't think like that.

**Were they involved in the shaping of the piece?**

— No, we did the whole thing. It's not like I'm revealing major dirt, but there's some stuff they'd rather not be in there. We finished the whole thing, and it was before Sundance and it was important to show it to them. It was before we did these two residencies, one at MASS MoCA and one at the Exploratorium. I flew to Calgary, which was the only way I could connect with them. They were doing a show there. We all sat in a hotel room, and I showed them a video, and I was so nervous. It was edited like a regular movie, where you have the images, and I recorded the narration and we put the music in — all the music was prerecorded by them. It was a mock-up of the piece. It's everything except the liveness of it. So, we sat there and watched it, which was kind of excruciating. They were positive, but they had a couple small things. The part about his son dying is really hard for David. In the beginning, he would fuck up the next song [on stage] because that's tough stuff. He would rather that not be in there. I think

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[Images: Kronos in 1987, courtesy of KPAA (pg. 64), courtesy of Wexner Center (66-67), courtesy of William Wegman (68)]

that's too fancy, too overlit or something, or where the actors overdo it or under-do it, you kind of know it's wrong. It doesn't start from an intellectual thing. There's an element of intellectual thinking at some point, but you basically start to live and breathe your film, understanding it more and more. And from a little bit of a chaotic approach, you arrive at the only possible order and the only possible shot.

It's also thinking on your feet. I started as a documentary filmmaker, not one who just follows the action with a wide lens but who tries to kind of sculpt a film. I know if I'm left to my own devices, if I chose the right cast and I know the story inside out—even if we overshoot by four days or five days—then I'll get there. You need to have tolerant producers who don't sack you after a week. And you need to also have faith in yourself. I don't think I'd have that kind of freedom with commercial film.

## **THE PRESENT MOMENT**

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he's come to understand that that's an important part, but still, he doesn't like to sit through it. That's why they're not playing there. They couldn't play that piece, the Laurie Anderson piece, so we were just stumped. Early on, the solution was for them to leave the stage. And then we were like, "We'll just play the recorded version, and you guys just sit in the darkness."

**That's fascinating. You can think of a dance, for example, where the soloist has a physically strenuous segment and then leaves the stage for a bit to recover. Here, you have the subject of the film onstage, and the emotional demands of listening to his interview require the same kind of sensitivity to pacing.**

**So, tell me about how you think about yourself as a performer. In the past, you haven't worked with a director, although many artists performing one-man shows do. Here, though, you have Joe Bini.**

— Joe in some ways was really helpful because he would sit out there and could tell me certain things. And also he directed Kronos, which was great. We were rehearsing one section, and he stood up and said, "You guys should come in faster here." They are actually used to working with composers who direct them, so it was fine.

**In terms of direction, do you ever think about the character that you play? Are you the same Sam Green in all of the pieces you've done?**

— It's hard to talk about this because it veers into thinking about yourself in the third person, which is always slightly painful. But I can't act, and I don't even see myself as a performer. I'm basically just being myself. But Joe definitely approached this as me as a character.

**Is that the first time in your pieces that that's been the case?**

— Yeah. He really pushed and shaped

that notion that I'm a character. A character who is not far from who I am. Sort of me, but as a character.

**And how would you describe that character?**

— Curious. I'm from Michigan so there's a certain kind of Midwestern pleasantness—earnestness, I guess is the word. It's a little hard for me to see it.

**At the start of the project, did Joe have an idea of how this character should feel, should function?**

— Yeah. I think it's not far from what it is, but there's this thing in the documentary where it's a journey or a quest. He sort of accentuated me in the archives, looking for things. There's a slight narrative arc there.

**You reference utopianism in the segment about "The Lost Chord," and you've also made a whole other film about that. What fascinates you about the concept to carry it over into this other work?**

— When I did the short film about them, I interviewed David Harrington, and he said that long quote [in *A Thousand Thoughts*] about trying to make a kind of music that could keep your family safe. I was just taken with that. All of my films have come out of being struck by an image or a story or somebody saying something, and that got me because it was so both noble and at the same time crazy and utopian. And learning more about him, about his story and about him losing his son, made me appreciate what this was.

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profoundly aware of the room and being lost with what's on the screen. Both of those are magic experiences, and to traffic in both seems extra powerful. So, at some point, I don't know how the John Cage thing came about, but it was like, "Yes, we could have people really focus and listen."

## **INTO THE WILD**

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it's there somewhere." He's got so much material to look through that it's easy to miss stuff. I can almost remember

every shot that I've done. In fact, on *Monrovia* I think there are more cuts on that film than any other film that he's done. I think there're 1,250 shots in it. Which is a lot.

### **How about the editing?**

— I'm not involved at all with the editing, but when he gets to the rough cut I'll say, "I want to come over and have a look at it." He edits in Paris, so it's easy for me to jump on the train and go over there. My initial response quite often is mixed. Sometimes, I'm a little bit disappointed. Sometimes, I think it's just too long, and I'll be disappointed that he's left out some sequences that I thought were really good—like the girls choir [in *Monrovia*]. There's a shot where he cuts just before I pan left, and you think when you're looking at the scene that they're performing in front of an audience, but they're not. They're performing in front of a mirror. So, just at the point where I pan to the left and you see that they're looking at themselves, he cut that. So, I said, "Why did you cut the end?" and he said, "Well, it went on for two and half minutes." We'll have that usual argument.

**There's an element of visual beauty in this film that isn't as pronounced as in, say, *In Jackson Heights*. Were you excited**

So part of the film was just trying to get a sense of this.

### **What has this work opened up for you going forward?**

— Well, honestly, it's funny to talk about your own work this way, but I feel like this is the best thing I've made, which is nice because I've been making films for 20 years. I've made a lot of films, and there's not a film I think is a bad film, but it's actually nice to, at 52, make something and say, "This is the best thing I've made." In some ways, it gives me a confidence. Right now, Joe and I are working on new ideas, and we're working on new ideas for regular movies, believe it or not. In a way, [this piece] feels like the end of an inquiry. What can you do with this form? Each project I've done has been pushing it further, has tinkered with it. In some ways, this was the perfect piece because it's about music, with music at the heart of it, but more than that it's about ephemerality and the experience of music. So, there's a kind of self-referential, multidimensional nature to this that would be hard to go beyond, I think. But maybe I will. I don't know.

**One thing I was struck by was the porousness of the video versus the live work, those hand offs. They're aston-**

**ishing when they happen, but they also seem totally natural. I'm thinking, for example, of the duet with the throat singer or the discussion of bow expression, this musical technique that can't be described well in the video interview, so then it's played live on stage. In thinking about montage, editing, that feels radical because the cut is going across time itself.**

— One of the things that attracted Joe to this project was the idea of editing in this further dimension. It's funny, too, because you have no idea how it will work until you try it. The bow expression thing just came from us realizing that nobody knew what [was being talked about in the video interview]. And, "Wait a moment, we can just have him play it!" The live duets between Kronos and the people on the screen were really complicated to make happen. I had this idea of not just musicians accompanying an image, but the frozen image and the live moment connecting.

And [about] the John Cage [excerpt of "4'33"]]: In a movie, if you are completely engrossed in the screen, that's ideal. You never want to be aware of the room. But the great thing about this form is you can toggle back and forth between being