

Interview with Dylan Carlson

Interview by Lori Goldston
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LG: How long has Earth been around?

DC: We started in '89. In Olympia.

LG: I'm interested in what your original idea was, and what's changed and what's stayed the same.

DC: My first band was, you know, bad punk rock. At least in my world that's how most people I know started up. Obviously some people have musical training and started somewhere else, but that's where I started.

I was into rock music when I was a kid, but never really thought. "I could do that." It was always something other people did; it was like, there are rock stars and there are rock fans and the two shall never meet. I think it was the rock press that started that more than the bands. Then there was an elite that had to be serviced by these elite writers.

My dad asked if I wanted a real guitar and that just blew my mind, because the thought had never even crossed my mind. The only people I knew who played instruments were like my aunt who played piano, or my grandmother who played organ and sang at church. That was the music that was open to us common folk.

LG: So you didn't know anybody in rock bands or anything growing up?

DC: No, I didn't know anyone that played an instrument outside of school bands, and even that, I don't remember that many. And I took a piano class in sixth grade at school.

I was sixteen when I finally got the guitar, in high school, back in North Seattle.

There was this guy I knew, Griff, he was a prog rock guy, into Yes and that kind of stuff. He was also into punk rock, so he turned me onto a lot of the punk rock bands, and wrote out some chords for me to practice and that kind of thing.

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The two bands I was in before Earth I wasn't satisfied with. The first was the punk band, and I think we played one show. The second I started with Slim, Nisqually Delta Podunk Nightmare. The one guy said we were like a cross between Flipper and Cinderella.

LG: So were you really a rock guy by then? At some point you turned into a fan of metal.

DC: Yeah, AC/DC was the first band I fell in love with, and I actually paid for the record myself.

LG: So the punk rock was a practical detour because it was so playable?

DC: Well I really got into X. They were the first non-traditional band that I liked.

My parents were both into rock; my dad listened to Bob Dylan, and my mom was into the Velvet Underground and stuff like that. My brother got into music first. He was into Stevie Wonder and Kiss, which is a little bizarre. Later he got into punk rock, more for the political side of it than the music side. Under the influence of my first guitar teacher I got really into King Crimson and that kind of stuff.

After the second band broke up I'd moved back to Seattle and spent two years learning stuff.

LG: What were you learning?

DC: Theory, what chords mean, all that kind of stuff. King Crimson was, to me, the greatest band ever at the time.

I moved back to Olympia, then we decided to start Earth. Obviously I still liked metal and punk rock, but that's when I started discovering La Monte Young and

Terry Riley, and through King Crimson discovered the German bands. There was a record store that sold prog rock a lot of that stuff.

LG: What was the record store?

DC: It was called Mount Olympus Records. They had all this foreign stuff: Can, Neue, Popol Vuh. Anything European was classified as prog rock; I don't know why, that's just how it happened. And these French bands, Shylock, and Magma and all that.

LG: And you had that in your head more when you started Earth.

DC: Yeah, definitely. I still liked Sabbath – I always liked the classic metal, except, like, Slayer, and some others. I love Deep Purple; they're one of my favorite bands ever. And then Zeppelin, and all the usual suspects.

LG: Which was the first Earth record?

DC: Extracapsular Extraction. It was '90 when we recorded it, but it didn't come out until '91. By then it was me, Dave Harwell and Joe Preston. I was living back in Seattle. 33We did a couple early shows with Slim. I loved what Slim did, but I didn't feel like vocals had that much of a spot in the band. He had nothing to do for long periods of time.

LG; The record reflects that, right? There are just spots here and there when someone's singing.

DC: If the singer's not playing an instrument then they either have to attack the audience or do something on stage.

LG: So you had these European records in your head when you made Extracapsular Extraction. Those early Earth records are so different from each other, and the songs are different from each other. They came out on Sub Pop and seem so odd in that universe, but then if you think about them in terms of weird European experimental rock records they make way more sense.

DC: That album, to me, is divided: there's the experimental rock stuff, and there's a metal riff, it's just slowed down. "Orobouris is Broken", if you speed it up it's practically a Slayer riff.

LG: Absolutely!

DC: The two poles I swung between.

LG: But already with that record, the textures are so extreme and expressive; they seem so unusual for that time. More records do that now - the timbre is so dense and emotional. The timbre has a *lot* of emotional content! Where did that come from?

DC: I don't know. Maybe because of that time in your life, you're more volatile or something. No matter what you're doing, how conceptualized it is, that comes out.

LG: You have more of that dramatic, adolescent energy.

DC: And especially as rock musicians, you're allowed to be adolescent for the rest of your life!

To me the magic about music and instruments is that somehow this interface between this human being and this technological device, that the human still comes out. Theoretically it's just a finger and a string and a vibration, so why can you tell "That's this guy" and "That's that guy"?

LG: It's very mysterious.

With that record, one of the things you were working with is that Sunn amp.

DC: The Beta Lead.

LG: Which is so throaty! It seems like part of it is you mining what's available in that bestial amplifier.

DC: That's what Buzz was playing when I first saw the Melvins.

LG: You definitely sound on that record like a friend of the Melvins. Not like it's a rip off of them, but very extreme in that same way.

DC: That was what I always thought was so cool about the Melvins at the start, it was heavy and big, but there was always that emotional connection that came through everything.

LG: Very human, and funny, too. It was nice how had they always had this irony packed in.

DC: At times they probably should have had [more] irony, like when they used to cover that Kiss song, "Going Blind", which if you just read the lyrics is sort of ridiculous. But when they did it they were so committed to it that it lifted it up into something greater.

LG: If anybody could lift up Kiss it's them.

DC: That was what I always thought was so amazing about the Melvins when they did covers. They inspired me in that way: they took a cover and totally made it theirs. Whatever they did was theirs!

LG: So you've had this band for a long time, and you've been interested in and listening to all these different things. Some stylistic shifts are connected to what you're thinking about and listening to, but a lot has stayed the same.

DC: I always preferred the slower tempos and longer songs.

LG: You have this strange sense of time and development; things unfold in this very particular way. Were you thinking about a particular thing as that developed, or is that just in you somehow?

DC: I don't know...

LG: Do you just have a long attention span?

DC: When I get into something, whatever I'm into at the time just consumes me for however long I'm into it.

LG: Once you start playing a song you're just *really* into it, for a while?

DC: Obsessive, but with a long arc. Whatever I get into, I get into that, to the exclusion of everything else. But when I come out of it it's like, how do I integrate it into what I was doing? It probably doesn't – it's probably all in my head that it connects.

LG: You mean within a song or within an album?

DC: Song, or interest, or album.

LG: You could say the same thing within the lifespan of the band, too.

DC: When I get into something, since I *don't* want to do a genre record – like if learn a new technique on guitar, let's say from country music instead from rock, I don't want to use it until it's become integrated in my technique. I don't want it to be like "Here's the country part", or "Here's the country record." I don't put it into anything until I feel like it's integrated.

LG: Fast forwarding to the new album: was there something that ties together those songs for you? Was there something you'd been thinking about or listening to?

DC: I with think both the songs, which are more constructed, and the improvised stuff, to me anyway they reflect Fairport Convention, or the Pentangle, or Tenariwen.

Pentangle especially, because they took British folk but brought in elements of jazz and blues and integrated it, so it just sounds like Pentangle. If you want to you can go through it and go "Okay, there's the jazzy part," but it doesn't sound like *that*.

LG: It doesn't sound contrived.

DC: Yeah. But I definitely think there's the Earth thing going on.

"Old Black" is a minor thing; I never explicitly tried to do a minor key thing before. I used to always try to do – like Fairport Convention does it a lot, where

they do melancholy or tragic stuff, but in a major key. That always sounded best to me, because sometimes minor key stuff can sound kind of maudlin. But I wanted to try it with “Old Black”.

The idea of the riff for “Father Midnight” came from that French guitarist Fred Chichin. Obviously it doesn’t sound like one of his songs.

LG: What was the feeling you were trying to carry over from what you heard of him?

DC: Actually, it’s funny, when I wrote that I hadn’t heard him yet. I just read the riff in a magazine. So it was more based on the pictures of the band he was in. He had this image - what do they call it? – from Montmartre, the dandy from the bad part of town; well dressed but kind of scruffy. In French music it seems like there’s always this weird nexus of popular music and criminals.

LG: Well, not just French music.

DC: Yeah, you could say all music: blues, jazz. But for some reason the French seem to be really into that. I don’t know if for real - I’m basing it on French movies.

LG: I was just thinking about the early Sub Pop bands being into that, too, everybody’s songs about how wicked they all are. None of them were that wicked, really. Like the Mudhoney songs - they’re very nice guys, but all the songs were about how they’re antisocial perverts. There was something about that time that made it a fun thing to do.

DC: In rock music and popular music the lower your origins the better, even if they’re not real. Even now, if you find out a band is made up of people that come from money they’re always kind of “Oh, they’re rich kids.” They’re beyond the pale, or they’re faking it.

LG: So if you’re some suburban kid you have to play it up somehow.

DC: Contemporary values turned on their head. Whereas someone who plays classical music, even if they’re not from a wealthy background, it’s almost automatically assumed that they are because of the cost of the instrument, the

schooling required, even though there are probably just as many musicians in that realm that came from the suburbs as any genre. It's okay for them to be that way,

LG: It's not very rebellious to be suburban.

DC: We all want to be from somewhere else. And then Sub Pop had the whole – like Tad I always thought was really funny. No band was more created image-wise than them on Sub Pop. They're rednecks, blah blah blah. It was all not true, *none* of it was true. Everyone believed that Tad was a butcher from Idaho, all these bizarre stories people just ate it up.

I remember the first interviews with Guns N' Roses, it was all about how squalid their surroundings were at the start, even though Slash was born and lived in Laurel Canyon and his neighbor was Joni Mitchell. But the whole myth is that Axel Rose came off the bus from Illinois or Indiana and they lived in squalor and sold plasma.

The earlier glam bands all came from the working class, but the idea was to portray "We're wealthy, and can afford all these chicks and fancy guitars!" But all of a sudden that was bad, and it went back to the old glam thing: "We're from the gutter!" Same with punk rock.

LG: Did it come from blues, or before that?

DC: Yeah, I don't know.

LG: Everyone's shooting for authenticity.

DC: That's what's interesting to me. There's this really interesting book about the blues, [*Chasin' That Devil Music*], about how authenticity didn't become important until white people got into the blues. Muddy Waters and all the original guys, they were trying to make hit records. That's what they cared about. They wanted out of the ghetto, they wanted big cars, they wanted to support their families, they wanted consumer goods. And then white people get into it and suddenly it's this folk art. The authentic guys are the acoustic guys from the hills. Even those guys weren't originators, they were playing songs they heard off the radio!

LG The guys in Chicago were playing the same thing on electric guitars...

DC: But that wasn't "authentic". Some fourth rate guy in the pen playing songs off the radio is the "originator".

Bob Dylan brings electric guitars to Newport and Pete Seeger has a conniption fit and tries to cut the power. And everyone starts booing. I was reading about the tour they did when the Hawks – later the Band – was his backup band. They were booed at *every single show* on the whole world tour. Because everyone was expecting the folksy angel of the working man and here's this speed freak dandy with his electric rock band.

It was bizarre, especially because that whole image that he did was contrived. He wasn't Woody Guthrie, he was a Jewish guy from Minneapolis.

LG: To get back to the new album: what's stayed the same and what's changed? It feels very additive, it shifts around, or the percentages shift around, the texture maybe moves slightly one way or another, but it's still easy hear the droney La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Can stuff in what 's happening now.

DC: Some people are like "Oh, you guys have changed so much." I go back and I listen, and – maybe just because it's me; everything sounds continuous. None of the changes have been that dramatic to me. But people act like "*Every* album is *completely* different!"

LG: It all sounds like Earth.

DC: The way I look at it is there's a thing I do with the slow tempos and long songs. To me each record is going back in influence. At first it was prog rock and heavy metal, then more "classic" rock, then blues and country and now folk music.

Because I view music as this continuum ; no one "invented" anything! For one thing I think it misses the point entirely. Who cares who invented it? Again, it's that authenticity thing: who was the authentic first? That's not how things are, how anything is. It's all a continuum of development.

LG: You *can* hand it to some people for having a strange take on what they're doing. I was listening to Howlin' Wolf, and in a way it's just this old country blues, but there's something else in there! Technically, people say "It's a song he learned from Charlie Patton. What's so original about that?" But there's something about the way he did it that was pretty weird!

DC: You can originate without being the inventor. Where did blues come from? The twelve bar pattern comes from Norway. How the hell did that get in there? Pentatonic scales have been used by *everybody*. It's music. It's just music.

As long as humans were conscious, I think there's been music. That's my personal take. It just developed this way here and that way there. People don't sit in one spot, people move around and mix and share ideas and technologies and fuck on another and have kids. This whole idea of purity and authenticity is bizarre. It's some weird construct. If you're so worried about purity you're going to end up like the Egyptian royal family, completely inbred and freaky looking. And then you're going to die out and be replaced by the next invader. There's no place for that.

I feel like I'm going back, and integrating earlier versions of this continuum into what I do, becoming aware of earlier things. I hope I'm getting better at playing; the idea is that I'm getting better at what I do, integrating earlier and earlier sources. That's the difference, not a radical departure. The three main things have been the same: length, drones and tempos.

LG: Beyond that there are some aesthetic things that are harder to pin down.

DC: The band, to me, has changed in this way, too. Before, it was more like conceptual art, where there's this idea and you make the music from the idea. Now I make music and the idea gets revealed to me, or I figure out the idea, or in discussion with the other musicians. It's more organic, I guess. The concept comes out the materials instead of this concept creating the materials.

I don't name albums now before I record them, whereas before I already had an idea for the name of the album and the names of the songs before I even recorded. Now I end up with songs and no titles, and have to come up with the titles later, listening to the songs.

LG: For “Hell’s Winter” what was the idea you were working with as you wrote that?

DC: It was a riff we used to improv off of, and then we just altered it some.

“Old Black” was written: there are this many parts, these chords. It’s a song. Interestingly, it’s the oldest song on the record. It was written in 2009. I was working on “Father Midnight”; we tried it live once but it was a disaster. From “Descent to the Zenith” on was stuff that worked out live on that Wolves [in the Throne Room 2010 west coast] tour, or came up with in the studio and fleshed out. It starts constructed and opens out.

“Angels of Darkness Demons of Light,” the last song, is “roll tape and see what happens.” Adrienne walked in five minutes later and played drums. Everyone’s piled on.

The new music is less chordy. Before we had all these chords, there were guitar chords and piano chords, guitar solos and piano solos. It was very dense. Now the guitar’s melodic, the cello’s melodic and then there’s a rhythm section, so it’s more...

LG: It has more forward motion and less of a blocky, vertical construction.

DC: Yeah, to me we’re less Wagnerian and more Debussy-like now.

Lori Goldston is a Seattle based cellist and composer, and current member of Earth.