



## Cosmic Troubadour

### Multimedia minstrel Donald Rubinstein steps out of his hermitage

**Donald Rubinstein:** Composer, troubadour, minstrel of love, cosmic poet, a man on a journey to orbit the outer edges of the atmosphere and dive right to the heart of the human condition. His music and art defy categorization—complex scores of moving sound poetry, folk tunes that bop and rock, storytelling with a deep funky soul. He is a man who creates in a hermitage of thought and feelings filled with crystalline structure and form, buried treasures, ancient memories—ultimately an incredible archeology and encyclopedia of musical forms that invite us into his own Emerald City.

Rubinstein made his musical debut at age 25, composing the score to George A. Romero's cult classic film *Martin*. Since then he has released 22 CDs, scored several feature films, and performed and recorded with world-renowned jazz and folk/country artists. *Fingers*, his duet with Bill Frisell, was included on *JAZZIZ Magazine's* limited-edition CD *Celebration of the Modern Era*. Rubinstein's multimedia and visual works have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in collaboration with Kiki Smith. Currently in progress are *Pilgrim*, a film based on his life, and the experimental film *Fugue For Motorcycle*, both by director Miguel Grunstein.

**RL:** One of the things I know from my upbringing is that I was fortunate to be around magnificently creative people, and it has affected the way that I see and produce work. What were your earliest influences in music?

**DR:** Probably my brother, who I shared a room with, because he was heavy into music. He was five years older, and he was into both jazz and folk. I began to play music late in life relative to many, but I stored up so much interest and inspiration from my brother's playing music from Bob Dylan to Thelonious Monk—two of my main influences as a kid. By the time I got into high school I had expanded that and was listening to contemporary classical music as well. I have a photo of me at 16 holding a Thelonious Monk record with a Bob Dylan poster behind me and Karlheinz Stockhausen tapes spread around my feet. That's really what comprised my entire life is the love of all of those expres-

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sions. So when I exploded into music, it was pretty definitive for me once I knew that is what I wanted to do forever. I really regarded music as the highest pursuit one could have—it spoke to all my dreams and aspirations—so when I finally realized I could do it, I went into it full bolt. I think my brother was my first influence in everything I listened to as a kid.

**RL:** What came next? Was there some person or a musician that you got to work with?

**DR:** I was a pretty private person, and I think I stored up just a deep love of music. I gravitated towards figures like Thelonious Monk, Bob Dylan, Muhammed Ali. They represented to me an aspiration that I held dear inside of myself, and they were my greatest influence because they represented the far reaches. Also Jackson Pollock was a big influence. All these people represented a breaking-out-of and a moving-towards-an edge of things, and I wanted to go there. I'd say, more than people, this private life I had that was inhabited by music, art, and books [was] the [thing] that formed my life.

**RL:** Were you drawing and painting then as well?

**DR:** No, I wasn't. I started to draw and paint after I went to college in Boston. I was 21 and my girlfriend was in Brandeis. [My friends and I] all played music together, and they were that quintessential MO of artists who also played music, and we had a great little creative scene. I was practicing eight or ten hours a day and drawing the rest of the time. I had never drawn before, but I had absorbed a lot, so I maintained it as a practice all these years. It has maybe expanded into a full-blown expression, but it was always for fun, a relief from music.

**RL:** When I saw your work, it hit me, pow—all the people around Pollock, art from that era until about the early '80s, and then it's over. There's not so much progress anymore. Figures like Barnett Newman live

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Donald Rubinstein and *Trend* interviewer and artist/chef Ric Lum talk at Rubinstein's studio south of Santa Fe.

large in my mind. When I first saw one, wow!

**DR:** Rothko was like that for me.

**RL:** Yeah, Rothko. When I was a kid I would look at Clyfford Still—there's a trip, a road trip to Denver when they open that museum. He's rough. For years I'd just get angry sitting in front of his pictures, I didn't understand it. But I was having this reaction inside, and now it's coming out. So that is a way of learning.

**DR:** I'm a similar type of personality. I went to the Guggenheim, and I walked in the door and there was Picasso there. I was so overwhelmed, I had to leave the museum. I had to walk around the block two or three times, I was that blown away.

**RL:** As that comes through your music, how do you pass that on? Are there younger people that are now listening to your work, do you work with any kids?

**DR:** I don't work with any kids. I am pretty solitary in that regard, and fairly guarded—guarding my work and even opportunities for greater exposure. I have been reluctant in the past to move in that direction, just

sensitive, perhaps, and a little overwhelmed by the attention. I've been lucky enough from my early film scores with George Romero to receive letters from people who are influenced by it. I respond to people who are like me, to be frank, who are just out of their minds over music. That I could even be that for someone is pretty exciting for me. So when I have had an opportunity to "pass something on," I would take it. I hope that the work and the way I live my life is something that will influence somebody in a positive way, though in time I may lighten up a little bit and be a little more outgoing.

**RL:** Here we are—this is going to be out there!

**DR:** Yeah, man! This is great, I'm enjoying it. I want to really share my work. It is such a pleasure. I was really almost shocked by people who responded to the work when I was younger, because I was so internal and I was so lost in it, it was hard for me to respond. Now I've matured, I guess, and I relish the opportunity to share the work. I really kept a small circle around me—Bill Frisell, Terry Allen, Ed Harris, Kiki Smith—people that I could relate to, and I often had maybe one person who I was

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really intimate with in relation to sharing the work, and that interaction I would gain a lot from. George Romero, of course, and others. Now I am really enjoying the opportunities to share.

**RL:** I think for creative young people it's important to hear how other people create, how they came to it. And it's not necessarily that you need to sit in a classroom. It's about being curious and grabbing on to the things that really move you, not "Now what's cool, now what's hip?"

**DR:** There's a funny story about where I met Bill Frisell, who I've collaborated with on a number of things. We were both in Berklee College of Music—I only lasted two semesters there—but I was young and I had done an arrangement of some piece, and for some reason the teacher put it on the board and spent most of the class talking about how it is everything you did not want to do when you made an arrangement. I was not that affected by it. I thought he was an idiot, frankly. Anyway, he just kept going on and on. And then this guy shuffles up to me after the class and goes, "Excuse me, I just want to tell you I really liked your arrangement." That was Bill Frisell, you know! And we're both wearing the same Converse sneakers, and I think smoking Camel cigarettes, and bonded there.

So luckily even though I carried, to be frank, a great deal of insecurity in my life, I was always brave in terms of the work, and I was oblivious to opinions in terms of the work. And that helped me a lot. I guess part of the reason I stayed a little bit cordoned off from some opportunities for larger success was I needed to protect the work.

I also had a teacher back then I would like to mention: Madame Margaret Chaloff. She was fabulous, and after I left Berklee I studied with her. For those that don't know, she was a legendary piano teacher who taught Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Leonard Bernstein, an array of people. The first thing she said to me when she opened the door at her place, she looked at me and said, "You're too stubborn, I can't teach



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## TUNES



*Sky Shudder, Variation 1*, by Donald Rubinstein, mixed media on paper (2011).

you.” So I said, OK, lady, whatever. But then she said come in, and I ended up studying with her twice a week until she passed away about eight months later. It was an incredible privilege, and I would be remiss if I didn’t say as a mentor she really held up that light of following that goal that originally inspired me, coupled with a spiritual intensity and spiritual aspiration, which was a really good thing for me to see. Also she

gave me focus, because for a guy like me who was a little funky, part jazz, part folk, part classical, she afforded me this high level of learning, which was a great gift. So if I could pay that back to somebody, I’d sure like to, because it was a tremendous opportunity.

**RL:** So now the grown-up Donald, what’s really moving you now? Is there music that



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*Hair for One*, archival pigment print (2008).

you are listening to, or visual arts, things in the world in general, thinking about how the planet is moving along or how humanity is dealing with its neuroses?

**DR:** I try not to think about it, to be honest. Not the most magnanimous point of view. That said, I have great concerns for our planet, and I am still probably however internally driven to a fair degree. I am trying to develop, for lack of a better term, a unified field theory of art and music. I work in a lot of mediums, and I'm really interested in—and have been from the start—reaching a pinnacle from that early confluence of influences. That inspires me, almost like a scientist tries to unlock keys to the universe.

I'm inspired by people that are jumping off the bridge. I'm still inspired by that. I'm inspired by people who want to push the limit of things, who really want to soar. And in my maturity I recognize and respect the whole spectrum of effort in this regard. But what probably excites me the most is people on the edge of things, in music, art, and in the world. I'm not that interested in other people's work, even though I'm always thrilled to be inspired by it. Love is a great inspiration for me. The aspiration of love and the ability to love, to treat people well, to combine all these elements—to be gracious enough to embrace

### UPCOMING FROM DONALD RUBINSTEIN:

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people—all these things are part of that milieu that makes up my everyday effort.

More down to earth, I am working on a set of keyboard solos, a score, and I have two shows coming up, and also working on an installation piece called *Spoke* which tries to address all of those issues. I think the aspiration of discovery drives me in a big way. I still want to discover something. I feel there is something to unlock in the smallest place that has a great deal of energy, and that's the focus and the depth in which I try to go.

**RL:** You're also going to get married to a creative person [dancer Audrey Nadia Jajich]. That seems like a beautiful future.

**DR:** Yes it is, man. I'm thrilled. It is a great opportunity to be reborn, really. The great opportunity is to love—you know, like many of us, I have not always been good at it. I have a lot of love in my heart, but the ability to engage everyone in my intimate relationships with consistent love is a challenge. And in my relationship and marriage to come, I have an opportunity to love somebody to the best of my abilities, and the possibilities that might ensue from that—to love her wildly to the best of my abilities. That's my plan!

**RL:** Beautiful plan! Thanks, Donald. ✨