

Interview with Sam Broussard

RW: How did you get started playing guitar, composing, and performing?

SB: I began by learning to play guitar, learning an instrument. I had drive, and went fast. I wanted it, no one had to make me practice. I had a good ear and was soon teaching myself by learning songs from records. I would put that needle back a hundred times if I had to in order to learn a passage. I learned some complicated things that way, I was patient. Maybe it would be different if I had started with GarageBand. These days some people just sit down at a computer and pretty soon they're producing tracks.

RW: How did you get started recording your own music?

SB: I've been doing home recording for a long time, starting with multitrack cassette recorders. I resisted going the computer route as long as I could because I didn't like all the steps involved in punching in. It ruined the spontaneity. I was recording with tape machines, and then with the Alesis HD24 for a while; it had a footswitch I could use to punch in. I finally gave in and started using Logic software to record. Now I play a part over and over until I get something I like, and then if I want to make it perfect I can fix the rhythm with Flextime or correct the pitch with Melodyne. My albums were done with very little pitch correction but I use it more now, because I have less time to record.

RW: Who played the parts on "Times Like These"?

SB: I played stereo acoustic guitar tracks, electric guitar, fretless acoustic/electric bass, some fiddle, and then orchestra parts using the Miroslav Philharmonik sound library. I had an Alesis HR15 drum machine that would trigger sounds in a Roland module. I love the HR15, and I'm a great drum programmer. I hired Doug Belote to overdub live drums at Axis Studio (now Esplanade Studios) in New Orleans. He wanted to play to the click, but at the time I didn't know how to record the click in Logic, I just learned that recently. So he played to all my programmed drums, and did all the tracks in one day. It was amazing. We left a few drum things in from my parts here and there.

RW: String samples can be hard to use because the articulation that is built into them has such an effect on what sort of lines sound convincing. Do you start with a musical phrase in mind and then search for a patch that can play it, or do you dial up a sound and then experiment to see what you can do with it?

SB: I usually start with an idea in my head and look for an instrument that can play it. The Miroslav library has great expression tools, but while the ensemble strings have either full or no vibrato choices, there isn't the choice for no vibrato in the solo instruments. On solo strings the vibrato is too thick, and therefore inappropriate for some non-orchestral music. On several of the songs I played the fiddle myself. I'm no good, but hey, it's a computer...

I love the way strings were used on Beatle records, especially on Strawberry Fields Forever. Lots of glissando. At the time I didn't know how to use a keyboard controller's pitch wheel on the Miroslav sounds, but Logic comes with its own massive library of samples and patches, and the pitch wheel works with some of them, so it's a mix of the two libraries and my own violins, one of which has strings on it one octave lower.

RW: How is recording track by track different than playing together in a band? How do you keep the energy up when you're playing one track at a time? How do you balance what you're playing and leave space for each of the later parts to come through?

SB: After a certain number of years of playing it's no longer an issue. The internal switch gets thrown, and I can record with the same energy that I use live in front of a crowd. Recording with the computer is a different animal; it's less like music and more like painting – but easier to erase. It's more robotic in many ways, but I think that the really great people that are long gone and that we admire would use this technology if they'd had it—the old Cajun musicians would have used fuzz tones and delay pedals – and computers. I do believe computers have made music worse in general, but I blame the operators and the current culture's ready acceptance of crap. My generation made a lot of crap, but the radio had a higher percentage of songs that could change your life. Having said that, most younger people know older music pretty well, which is very cool. A smaller percentage of my generation had any useful awareness of what came before.

RW: Did you grow up in a Cajun family and learn the music the traditional way in a musical family?

SB: I grew up in a Cajun family, but not playing the music. It was in the air, on radio and TV, but I didn't start playing it until the mid 1990s. It's the hardest thing I've ever learned, and twenty years later I'm still not there. "Times Like These" doesn't have any Louisiana influences. Other songs on the *Veins* album do.

RW: What was the inspiration for "Times Like These"?

SB: It comes from what I would think would be a very old idea—the relationship between sex and the nearness of death, how the urge for survival of the species rears its head when death is imminent.

RW: You're the guitarist in Steve Riley's band, with four Grammy nominations. Is that your main musical outlet these days?

SB: My playing is pretty equally divided between the band and playing solo locally in restaurant bars. I've recorded hand percussion – slapping the guitar – at home into a looper, and then on the gig I loop certain sections so I can solo over the changes. I have a lot of fun. I also screw it up a lot, but these days nobody notices.

RW: You played on Caleb Elliott's "Where You Wanna Be", another song in the book, this time recorded by Tony Daigle. What is it like recording someone else's song rather than your own composition, and having an engineer like Tony to take care of capturing the best sound so you can just concentrate on playing the guitar?

SB: Tony will correct me when he has to, and he's always right, always. But I have great microphones and preamps, so soundwise I usually give him a good file that doesn't require him to work harder. As far as performances go, all you can do is record things you want to hear, hand it to them, and accept their decisions as to how they use it, if at all. It can get to you, but hey, it's a metaphor for life, isn't it? Rejection and experiencing consequences are as necessary as food. If you can't handle them, you *will* go to prison.

when they are mixing it to get the right sound? What are you listening for when you're mixing? How do you know when it's done?

SB: I grew up with fewer categories within pop music, so that's a tough question. I consider it acoustic contemporary folk music, because the lyrics, the story, is most important in my mind. Then someone came along and electrified it. I think Simon and Garfunkel's *Sounds of Silence* was cut acoustically, then some producer or executive called in musicians and fleshed it out without telling them. That's how I see this song.

When mixing, I like to hear everything – nothing is there for “texture,” it's all there to be heard. So classic EQing and panning for separation and clarity. And then, I don't like vocals too loud, because it makes the track sound weak – in other words, turning a vocal up is the same as turning the track down. It's a fine line between understanding the words clearly and getting a slamming track. Nashville has gotten good at doing that, even with the vocal in your face. Other pop musics don't bother because the lyrics don't matter. Rap is different; they generally and wisely avoid clutter to make the lyrics understandable.

RW: Would you be able to shorten the form of “Times Like These” if someone asked for a version to fit a shorter project? If readers were going to try to edit it as an exercise, what part would you think would make the most sense musically to cut?

SB: I would shorten the end, I guess. I can't imagine cutting any lyric content. I would pull the song first. I have my limits.

RW: You recorded this song a while back, and you said that you'd learned a lot since about recording, that this song could serve as an example in a chapter about what not to do. What suggestions do you have for readers who are starting to learn about music production?

SB: Well, a lot of my mistakes were corrected by myself or Tony Daigle. Don't record really hot signals; just put energy into the performance and the compression aspects of mixing and mastering will make it slam. Also, I usually fail at some part of my goal of making all parts stand up individually and not recede into an unheard support role or textural identity. It's an unrealistic goal, totally irrational, but it's mine. Near the end of this song you stop hearing the guitar as other things pile on top of it – you have to work to hear it. There wasn't any way to avoid that, but still, it always bothers me. It means that I need to be a better arranger.

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