Shawn Clement: Living The Dream

By Joshua James

Shawn Clement is a graduate of the prestigious Berklee College of Music and has performed with a variety of musical greats, including Eddie Van Halen, Skunk Baxter, Harry Dean Stanton and B.B. King, but he's made his name as a composer for film and television and loves every minute of it.

"I write to pictures," Shawn maintains.

Shawn knew what he wanted to do with his life at the tender age of thirteen. The Milford, Massachusetts native started playing guitar at twelve but even then he knew that simply playing in a band wouldn't be enough for what he wanted to do. He wanted to write music for movies.

"I loved all music, from Zeppelin to Classical, my tastes in music go beyond a lot of borders," Clement explains. "Nothing against playing in a band, I've played in a lot of bands and had a great time, but to me it felt like there wasn't enough evolution. You'd spend a few months writing songs and the next couple years playing the same stuff, over and over. Too repetitive, for me. I wanted, even from an early age, to do a lot more with my music."

With this in mind, Shawn went west to Los Angeles and set his sights on scoring for film and television.

"Scoring is intense, challenging and more importantly, diverse, the only way to really embrace all styles of music," Clement adds. "When I was a kid, I'd watch movies on television and be listening to the music behind them. I knew that's what I wanted to do, way back then, that was my dream."

Dream Not Reality

Shawn now lives his dream. As the composer for many top-rated network reality shows like "World's Wildest Police Videos", Shawn helped pioneer the definitive dramatic musical style of the reality genre. In recognition, ASCAP presented Clement with a film and television award for Most Performed Underscore in 2000. A multifaceted composer, Shawn's film credits include Karla (dir. Joel Bender), 2004: A Light Knight's Odyssey (with John Travolta, Samuel Jackson, Christian Slater, Michael York, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Anne Archer and James Earl Jones), Bad Girls From Valley High (with Christopher Lloyd), We Married Margo (Audience Favorite Award winner at the HBO/U.S. Comedy & Arts Festival with Kevin Bacon & Tom Arnold), and Last Chance (Best Original Drama winner at World Fest). He has also scored such television series as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Queer Eye for the Straight Girl, and I'm Still Alive. Shawn's acclaimed video game scores include Batman: Vengeance, Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu, Open Season for Sony and Kim Possible; What's The Switch for Disney.

But it wasn't all awards and acclaim in the beginning. Shawn lived the life of a starving artist when he first arrived.

The Mad Scramble

"I got here the same day the earthquake hit in '94," Shawn explains. "The work I had lined up to carry me until I got some music gigs had disappeared, destroyed along with building I would have been working in. I had to scramble. I went hungry for awhile and it wasn't fun, it's not nearly as romantic as it sounds, but I knew I was in the right place for what I wanted to do. Finally I got a mailroom job at Sony to sustain me and I networked like mad, I went to every industry event there was, meeting people and getting my name out there."

The networking paid off when Shawn got hired to write music for a Showtime series called Women and to score The Savage Dragon, an animated series, for Universal.

"I didn't have a studio when I started," Shawn says. "I had my guitar and a keyboard and that was it. I had to borrow studio space from people I knew. I'd borrow someone's studio on a night when it was dark or if they had few hours open here and there and I had to work fast because the clock would be ticking. There was a lot of pressure and never enough time. You definitely learn how to work under deadline like that. Plus, I was always in a new studio and had to take time to become familiar with what they had there. But the good thing was that I learned how to use a lot of different kinds of sound equipment efficiently."

Shawn's reputation as a composer who did great work under a tight schedule spread and he was soon able to leave the mailroom after only nine months and start living his life's dream in real time as a composer. Shawn fast became in demand and remains so to this day, now operating his own studio, a full production recording facility at his Clemistry Ranch, with the film JUNE CABIN next on his docket among other projects.

Equipment Is Key

"It's so funny, how things evolve. In '95 I was doing enough work to get some good attention and I scored an endorsement from a software company, which supplied me with free recording software. The thing was, at that time, I didn't even have a computer!" Shawn laughs. "I had the software and no where to put it! Later on, I got an old computer from a friend that I used, an Atari, believe it or not, that I couldn't even record on. An Atari computer!"

These days Shawn has all the equipment he needs. A mastery of musical gear has won him endorsements from Yamaha Guitars, Cakewalk Music Software, Seymour Duncan, Dean Markley Strings, Rocktron, Lexicon, EMU, Frontier Design, Peavey and Nemesys and he's been featured in full-page ads in Mix, Keyboard, EQ and Recording magazines to promote gear for Frontier Designs.

"Everything is digital now and that's a good thing, because it's fast and efficient and what everyone uses. If a producer asks you, you can find a bit of music you wrote five years ago with the touch of a finger, you don't have to dig through closets and run through tapes, it's right there. There's no better way."

Balance is everything when one is in demand.

"When you do this kind of work, you're juggling a lot of projects all at the same time, it takes focus and discipline and most of all, concentration. It's like juggling bowling balls while riding a unicycle. Takes balance but if you don't have the right unicycle, the right equipment, underneath you, you're never going to be able to balance it all. You don't want to worry about losing all your day's work because a computer crashed, you know?"

Having used every type of digital audio equipment there is, Shawn is clear on what system he prefers. When it comes to his work, he chooses Rain.

"I've used everything and, quite simply, it's the best," Shawn says. "I use Gigastudio and Soft Sense all the time and they're big CPU hogs, on any other computer those applications would suck up all the resources. The Element, it carries the load with ease. And quiet, too. There's no whining or complaining that you hear with some computers. The Rain System is so quiet you can record with it in the room and not hear a thing. I write many pieces of music that are deeply layered and complex that require a lot of processing power. With the Element, I am able to run Giga 3.0, Project 5, Kontakt and Sonar simultaneously, on the same system, without problem or conflict. It's invaluable to have this level of performance and stability for completing demanding audio productions under intense deadlines. Plus, it's simple and user-friendly. You just turn it on and go!"

Simplicity Is Key

"Running my own studio, one thing I've learned is that simplicity is everything. The studio, the equipment, they're all a simple means to an end, a perfect conduit to the work I love to do. The way I have it set up here, nothing blocks the creative process, which is the most important thing. The music I love to do is layered and complex and I never have to compromise what I'm creating, it's ideal, really."

Shawn chuckles at that.

"Hey man, I built my dream studio at my ranch, with my dogs and horses and all the things I love around me while I do the work I love, what more can anyone ask for? I love my life, I really do."

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