

LA WEEKLY

Music

Droning Man

Cliff Martinez: The buzz
By Greg Burk

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Photo by Max S. Gerber

Cliff Martinez looks pale, and his eyes are darting around the sound booth at Stage 1 on the 20th Century Fox lot in Culver City. He's dressed in black, black like the quart of coffee in his fist, black like Halloween, which is today, almost a year ago. Funeral black, and it's Martinez's funeral. Scary time. Time to finish up the music he's created for Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris*. How's he feeling?

"Exhausted and terrified." And that's an improvement over yesterday. "I was an absolute wreck. Headache, blood in my urine. I feel great now that I can see how it'll all work together." A small smile dents his face. But that doesn't mean he's happy. He always smiles like that.

Sudden hubbub. What's the row? A taped crowd gabble accidentally bumped up? No, the engineer pushed the monitor button for the sound stage. Now we can't ignore the 90-some musicians jostling on the other side of the glass. A full symphony orchestra makes a lot of noise even when it's not playing.

On the conductor's podium, the bald-yet-shaggy guy in the T-shirt is Bruce Fowler, formerly a trombonist with Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart. And over there, isn't that his brother Walt, Zappa's trumpeter? The connection: Martinez himself used to drum with Beefheart. But this room is the heart of the Hollywood glitter factory. *What are all these freaks doing here?*

When Martinez rolled into Los Angeles in 1976, he was a Top 40 band drummer from Columbus, Ohio. There, he says, "The apex of a musician's career would be to play Vegas. My good gigs were playing Ramada Inns, 10 Neil Diamond cover songs a night." His voice is a high whistle; he manages to come off both confident and shy.

This solitary man has become a prime weaver in a new generation of soundtrack composers who spin ambient and electronic music into abstract atmospheres. James Cox's *Wonderland*, the 13th movie he's scored, has just hit theaters. Soderbergh has called on Martinez for all his films except the mainstream hit *Erin Brockovich*. Two years ago, for the Soderbergh-directed *Traffic*, Martinez even got a Grammy nomination — but he was a few minutes late for the awards show's start. "I was on needles and pins. An hour later, somebody said, 'You lost.'"

The path from the Ramada Inn to the Staples Center Grammy gala has been exceedingly indirect. Fresh in L.A. 27 years ago, Martinez enrolled in the Dick Grove Music School and later joined a combo that tried to find work playing George Benson covers. In 1980, he and his bandmates were rehearsing at Wilshire Fine Arts, the cheapest of our metropolis' crappy rental warrens, when an ungodly noise assaulted them through the tissue-paper walls.

"Everybody stopped playing and held their noses. We wanted to see what was making this awful cacophony." Luckily, the adjacent room had a window. What the spying jazzbos beheld was an original L.A. punk band, the Screamers, notable for their lack of guitars and for the maniacal onslaught of vocalist Tomata du Plenty. "Tomata's face was beet red," says Martinez. "Veins were bulging out of his forehead like thumbs. I thought the music was an affront. It was threatening to me; I hated it. Then I saw how sincere and how passionate they were about it, and I just turned on a dime. I went from hating it to loving it. And that's when I started checking out punk rock."

In a minute, Martinez himself was an underground musician, and thrashed with the Tenants, the Weirdos, Lydia Lunch, Two Balls and a Bat, and Butch — that one featured Sherry the Penguin, who had a day job as a dominatrix. “One guy in the group had a pretty rowdy gay lifestyle. I went over to his house to get a haircut one day, and, like, three guys jumped out of bed. I was from Columbus, and that kind of spooked me. But there was something about the seedy part of punk rock that I was always attracted to.”

Martinez briefly enlisted with Beefheart, thumping the tubs on 1982’s *Ice Cream for Crow*, the last album Beefheart made before the Captain retired to the life of a painter. When Martinez was younger, he’d admired Beefheart’s music. The actual man, though, was somewhat less safe than milk.

“He was a real abusive tyrant, always blaming me for ‘psychic interference.’ He would get really angry: ‘Man, he’s puttin’ tinfoil in my radar!’”

The punishment of a musician’s life was beginning to bury the rewards; the only thing that kept Martinez in the game was rent control. “In the Weirdos, I was always getting food stamps. A package of hot dogs and a can of Dole pineapple juice was all I had for an entire week. That’s the way I lived for 10, 15 years.”

That’s show biz: “You have to be willing to stand at the slot machine indefinitely and wait for the jackpot.”

Then, in 1984, he got with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It seemed like a payoff, if only of the nickel-slot variety — at the time, the Peppers were only a pink-warm commodity.

“It was like being married to three people you don’t have sex with. It took a lot of work, and I wasn’t that good at it. Did a lot of drugs, and traveling around the country on a pretty small budget, there wasn’t a great deal of comfort. I might’ve liked it when I was 20, but I was 30.”

Two or three years of glory, and then, “I was kicked out. I was getting to be an unpleasant person to be around. I lost interest in the lifestyle and the music, I guess.”

After he’d worn out the carpet in front of the slot machine for another three years, speeding along with persistent punkers the Dickies and scoring an episode of *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* among other activities, Martinez lined up his lemons and broke the bank in 1988. He’d been making sound collages — “body noises, pots and pans, sound effects, played rhythmically. I was working the cracks between music and sound effects.” Mark Mangini, a sound designer who’d been asked while working on the film *Alien Nation* for “some sound effects that were kind of like music,” had heard Martinez’s stuff and asked him to give it a whack on spec.

“They never used any of what I did, because the music was really pretty nutty,” says Martinez. Anyway, while Martinez and Mangini were listening to it, Mangini’s roommate butted in and started making suggestions. “We hit it off great. I could tell he was not a musician but had a great instinct about how to use music in films. He said, ‘This stuff would be perfect for my next film, *sex, lies, and videotape*. Would you like to score it?’”

The roommate was Steven Soderbergh, then an unknown. You are correct: Martinez did not decline.

Martinez’s natural inclinations are not overwhelmingly minimalist. But Soderbergh’s are.

“One time me and Steven went to see *The Rocketeer*, which had this bombastic orchestral score. And I was groovin’ on it, and Steven elbows me and goes, ‘Don’t you hate that shit?’”

Umm. But the novice soundtracker got inside the auteur’s head. A favorite story: Soderbergh’s customary once-over of Martinez’s prospective music.

“He doesn’t like any of the food groups of music. For years it’s always been, ‘That sounds good. But that something on top . . .’ ‘The melody?’ ‘Yeah, yeah. Get rid of that. Okay, that’s good. Now, what’s that thing on the bottom?’ ‘You mean the bass line.’ ‘Yeah, throw that out. And that thing in the middle?’ ‘The drum part?’ ‘Get rid of that.’ ‘Steven, now it’s just going *brzrzrzzz*.’ ‘Yeah, that’s the shit! Now you’re suckin’ some dick!’”

So Martinez has become a drone specialist. Just call him Buzz. In *sex, lies*, a brief low-end electronic sustain accompanies a realization entering a woman’s mind; an exterior night scene gets its depth from rims of crystal stemware rubbed to shrill ringing by vinegar-dipped fingers, as simple pings of piano divide up the time. In *The Limey*, a climactic plot revelation rests on a strong bass monotone and a gathering chord on strings. Martinez’s calm, shifting clouds on *Traffic* contrast against the film’s onscreen grit and bash. The soundtrack to Joe Carnahan’s *Narc*, though done on the cheap, is just as sensual, and more composed. %

As for *Wonderland*, which begins to look like Part 3 of Martinez's Dope Trilogy, it got off to a wild start for the scoreman. Martinez was having a meal with 27-year-old director James Cox at the Good Earth on Ventura Boulevard when a Humvee made a sharp turn and bounced over the curb, stopping inches from the glass behind which the two were sitting. The shaven-headed driver waved: It was Val Kilmer, who plays porn prick John Holmes in the movie. Martinez was already feeling a tad disoriented, as Cox hired him in part because he'd lived in Hollywood at the time of the film's celebrated murders.

"It was kind of, 'What was it like in the Civil War, Dad?'" says Martinez. Hey, it didn't seem that long ago to *him*. He's only 49.

Martinez got over it. His soft, subtle flourishes in *Wonderland* wouldn't yank your hairs if you weren't listening for them between the graphic skull crushings and the period hits from Ted Nugent, the Stooges, Patti Smith and 20 more. If you did listen, though, you'd appreciate his craft: the looping tubular bells, the gently tumescent synth, the crypt-tunnel F/X, each exactly what the scene needs and no more. A pattering electro-beat drifts away just as the last flake of blow vanishes up John Holmes' eager snoot. Nice.

Check the soundtrack CDs: Martinez's music makes an attractive listening experience on its own. But he never wrestles the visuals for attention. "Being a drummer may have been good training for that," he says. "Your gig is to accompany."

Basic accompanists aren't the only scorers who grab Martinez. He likes the gushes of Elmer Bernstein (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), but also Bernard Hermann (*Citizen Kane*): "He's one of the pioneers of minimalism in film. He had an amazing ability to take a simple three-note motif and spin off endless variations that not only held your interest, but created great emotion as well." More recently, Martinez has laid an approving ear on Hans Zimmer (*Matchstick Men*), Thomas Newman (*American Beauty*), Carter Burwell (*Being John Malkovich*) and Harry Gregson-Williams (*Chicken Run*).

More than movements or melodies, Martinez composes original *sounds*. That doesn't seem so tough. But look around his Calabasas home. Here, a roomful of big steel drums. There, a row of percussion tubes taller than he is. Martinez records most of his tracks in his own home studio; you have to build a thing like that and learn to operate it.

And he spends a lot of time poking around junkyards for percussion "instruments." "I discovered that generally the really cool stuff is large. I stick the mike right up against it and hit it lightly, trying to de-emphasize the onset of the sound and emphasize the tone, the ring-off," he says, applying a large, soft mallet to a hanging hunk that looks like a car hood, the top of which he's adorned with a row of metal antennas. A deep, watery sustain floods the room. He takes sounds such as this, processes them in different ways, samples them and stores them in his computer library.

The star of his living room, though, is an exotic instrument called the Crystal, which looks like something out of a Paul Klee drawing. Its tones come from a row of thin glass rods, which resonate against a sort of metal shield. Martinez first saw one as a child in 1965, at an art exhibition.

"It blew me away," says Martinez. "It made me not only want to be a musician, but to be a *weird* musician." He thought it would be a fantastic addition to the *Solaris* soundtrack, though it ended up being used more in *Wonderland*. He spent a lot of taxi fares in France tracking down its creators, François and Bernard Vachet.

"One of the brothers I guess you'd call a metal sculptor, and the other one is more preoccupied with acoustics. So they always built stuff that looked cool, and some of their instruments were actually a little more successful in the art world than they were in the music world. They're kind of hard to get. You can't order them from Guitar Center."

He had one flown in from France, and divined many of its secrets in just six weeks of lessons from the Crystal's only virtuoso, Michel Deneuve. Martinez dips his fingers in water and strokes the rods, whose tones rise into an enveloping, gorgeously thrilling blend. The smile is in his eyes now. He likes this job.

Soundtracking is "something I kind of learned just by doing it," he says. "I always felt like I just fumbled my way through it. But I finally feel like I'm beginning to get good at it. The film thing is kind of spooky, though, because as soon as your job is done, you're unemployed." Between movies, he has packed his head with formal knowledge, studying piano and orchestration. "I also spend quite a bit of time trying to keep current on music technology. Which means reading lots of manuals."

Last Halloween, back at the Fox sound stage, synchronization digits blur across the bottoms of several video screens filled with George Clooney's space-helmeted face. Nobody here knows yet that the theatrical run of Soderbergh's *Solaris*, an entirely new take on the Stanislaw Lem novel previously filmed by Andrei Tarkovsky, will be short, swamped in the holiday marketplace. The production credits of James Cameron and Jon Landau won't save it. Not even a couple of lovemaking scenes in which Clooney showcases his sculpted glutes will get it more than a passing glance.

It will turn out that *Solaris* — now out on video — just isn't a holiday movie. It's an austere, personal film whose deep emotion is, you know, a commercial problem. It asks questions most of us don't want to answer.

Conductor Bruce Fowler, who has orchestrated Martinez's score, lightly ushers the crowd of sawing and sonorizing instrumentalists through airy musical passages that waft over the *bwonks* and *pings* Martinez has recorded at home. Somebody suggests bringing the flutes up an octave, and the change is adopted. The music incorporates the feel of György Ligeti's *Atmospheres*, which was conscripted for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Martinez has studied the way Ligeti wrote parts for each of 28 violins so they'd enter and exit at different times, producing an impression of infinite continuity.

Soderbergh is nowhere around. He trusts Cliff with this stuff.

On the screen, the pixels of Clooney's face dissolve into the sparkled void, where a spacecraft floats, functional and beautiful. The music is perfect. Martinez hunches over his laptop. He's breathing. It's art.