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Valgeir Sigurðsson, left, with his interlocutor, Donald Gislason.
Valgeir's principal instrument, the mixing board, can be seen in the background.

A chat with Valgeir Sigurðsson

Behind the board with one of Iceland's premiere music producers

Donald Gislason

Composer and sound engineer Valgeir Sigurðsson is perhaps best known for his studio collaborations with Björk, with whom he worked on the soundtrack for Lars von Trier's 1998 film *Dancer in the Dark*, and on her subsequent albums *Vespertine* and *Medúlla*. His Greenhouse Studio in the Breiðholt suburb of Reykjavík is considered the best in the country, and is where he records the heterogeneous group of artists who make up *Bedroom Community*, his own record label. His first solo album, *Ekvilibrium*, was released in 2007.

In this interview, recorded in October 2008 at Kaffebarinn in central Reykjavík during the 2008 Iceland Airwaves music festival, we get a look into the creative process one of the most talented and

original studio musicians of our time, as well as his thoughts on the often-asked question: what makes Icelandic music so unique?

DG: Valgeir, how did you become a musician?

VS: I started playing electric guitar when I was 9 and found a local teacher to teach me rock. I was into punk, New Wave and that kind of stuff, and then I became interested in classical guitar so I studied that from the age of 14 or so. At around 16, I went into the studio for the first time and I haven't really left it since.

DG: So you have had a career as a performer, as a sound engineer, and as a composer. Which do you identify with most?

VS: I just see it as being a musician,

really. I was more comfortable in the studio than on the stage to begin with, so I guess I was more interested in collaboration than in just playing one kind of music. I was playing in a few bands, and touring a little bit and then I had to make the choice. There was no question that the studio was where I wanted to spend more time, bringing in different collaborators and working as an engineer, producer and composer. And it's only recently that I'm starting again to perform, both with my own music and with a few of the people that I work with in the studio.

DG: I've noticed that your music seems to have its roots in dance rhythms but there is also a much purer kind of esthetic at work, an interest in sound colour reminiscent of musique concrète from the experimental music

studios of France in the 1950s. Do you like to play with pure sound, without a sense of social occasion?

VS: Well, the stuff that I write, I take it pretty soon into the computer and start messing around in there on my own, before I start bringing anyone else into the mix, and before I make arrangements for, say, other acoustic instruments that I don't play myself. And that's what I am really excited about and was exploring on *Ekvilibríum*, my first solo album. And the *musique concrète* reference is good, in the sense that I use a kind of similar approach for the beat, sometimes, assembling material from random places, and incorporating it into the piece of music.

I don't really care where the material comes from, whether it's a purely electronic sound or an acoustic source. I think I kind of blur the lines there sometimes in my music. But one thing that I realized when I started performing the music – because I had never played any of this music live before I put it on the record – was that the material that I had created for the CD was sort of ... interchangeable. You can replace anything with anything, really, and that's what I enjoy doing most when I'm performing it live. I try to make it different, and not just replicate what it's like on the CD.

DG: In what sense is the material interchangeable? Can each layer of sound be taken out and replaced by another?

VS: Yes, that's what I've been working with a lot, changing the instrumentation quite drastically, or remove things completely, but aiming to arrive at the same emotional content or the same effect with a completely different line-up of instruments. The musical material stays the same, the notes and the beats stay the same, but they're just played by different instruments.

DG: So is changing instrumentation the main structuring element in your music, is that how the music develops?

VS: That's sometimes the case, yeah. And I like combining sounds to make new layered sounds, like prepared piano combined with harp and something percussive to make one unison sound. It becomes something that you recognize but you're not sure if it's exactly what you're hearing, and then it might morph into some-

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- Valgeir Sigurðsson

thing else two minutes later. You're listening to the same melody but they sound pretty different. That's one thing that I had a lot of fun with on the album, and I really enjoy when playing live. I give the musicians instructions to play something that they didn't expect that their instrument could be doing, and that's fun.

DG: Do you compose in the abstract, without a computer or a musical instrument with you?

VS: Most of my music starts at an instrument – most often the piano, sometimes the guitar - to establish the basic idea, the basic structure. Sometimes I play around with sounds that kind of trigger something, then I use that as a kind of bed to layer something on top of.

DG: What are the qualities of a good piece, for you? And a good recording? Is it the refinement, the placement in space, the transformation of the sound?

VS: Well, I think that first of all the piece of music needs to be already worth something, before you start thinking about enhancing it, or making the sound part of it interesting and fun. I collect sounds that I like and that kind of becomes the piece, in a kind of *musique concrète* way. That becomes a beat, or that becomes a theme. How I approach it varies a lot, but generally I look for detail in the sound. That's something that I instinctively do.

DG: What kind of detail attracts your ear?

VS: Sometimes it can be a slightly unpleasant detail, like the bow on the string, you know, rather than just the sound that has gone out into the acoustic space and reverbed around the room. So it can be the scratchy noise on the string, that kind of thing that, in classical music, you're not

used to hearing. I think in my own music I bring together the acoustic and the electronic. And the acoustic, for me, is usually more composed, rather than improvised. It's like a classical arrangement. I dunno, maybe I'm a control freak (laughs).

DG: Now I'm going to ask you the question that all foreigners ask every Icelandic musician. What is it with Iceland? Is there something in the water here? Why are Icelandic musicians so versatile, so well-trained? Why do they play in several bands at once? Why is their sound so unique? What's with you guys?

VS: I think it's about time that a musicologist like yourself wrote a study on this. Because this is the question that we all get. I have a theory about why Iceland hasn't been producing a lot of mainstream artists. I think that one of the reasons is that we don't have the record industry, the traditional music industry with big record companies that develop bands and expect them to fit them into a certain marketing profile, pushing them this way or the other looking for a trend. So things tend to happen more organically here. You don't really have that big-industry “scene” here ... yet. And it's probably not going to happen because Iceland is not big enough to be interesting for those major record companies.

But actually, I think it's an interesting time to be in music because of all that. There's so much changing, and it's one of the great things about being here is that you can experiment and try out a lot of different things. And the reason that people play in five bands is that otherwise they would be playing the same music for the same people every time you go out to play... (laughs). So people tend to be interested in and open to more styles, more influences. I guess that might be because



PHOTO: DONALD GISLASON

you have to, otherwise people are just going to get sick of you.

DG: Well, my own theory is that it's a question of scale, that Iceland is small enough to avoid the conditioning effects of the big companies, while still being large enough to give people important, resonant feedback to musicians on how they are doing. Is it, then, a question of scale? If Iceland were bigger, do you think that its music would be different?

VS: Yeah. I think so. And I think that's a good theory. Iceland is a good place to do things on a smaller scale and see if they work. Because there are not going to be many people who survive being in one band or being a solo artist in Iceland, not for very long.

DG: You mentioned the lack of the big labels. I'm interested in your own label, Bedroom Community. Could you tell me something about that and your artists?

VS: It's the label I formed in 2006. It's an Icelandic label, although I'm the only Icelandic artist on the label. We have three others on the label: Nico Muhly, who is a New York composer; Ben Frost, an Australian composer living in Iceland and working with me a lot on different projects in my studio; and Sam Amidon, a folk artist living in New York. Sam and Nico are both originally from Vermont,

and the label has released five albums.

It's a community in the sense that we all participate in each others' albums. I usually produce, mix, and more or less run the label. Then, Nico makes arrangements for everyone and plays and programs and so it's very collaborative, which is what I like.

DG: I came out to visit your studio because I want to get to know your label and the space in which you record. Could you tell us something about Greenhouse Studio?

VS: Greenhouse is a studio that I started in 1997, and we've been in here in Breiðholt since 2000. It started really small, with borrowed equipment and whatever I had collected. I started by getting bands that I had been playing with to come and record.

Music for the film *Dancer in the Dark* was probably the first major project that I did at Greenhouse. I started working with Björk on that in 1998, and then I re-located in 2000 when I had found this building. This is actually in quite an interesting street: the houses have big workshops and living spaces together in one building. It's a community that was started around 1980, I think, with artist workshops next to the houses.

Today, most of the artists have moved out and a few of the houses have been turned into apartments, but there's still a

few. There's a sculptor back behind this house and there's a sculpture garden at the other end of the street, so some of the older guys are still here. This is a workshop that I turned into a studio. It's a big open room with a lot of light.

The studio is basically built as a workshop for myself, that's the idea. But also we operate on a commercial level too. So it's set up so that anyone can bring their session in here and do whatever they need to do with all my instruments and my equipment.

DG: And recently who has recorded here?

VS: On a day-to-day basis it's me and Ben Frost, who's on the Bedroom Community label with me; we work here. My brother Mio runs the studio. We just had a band called Munich from Denmark. And Ben Frost is working on his second album for Bedroom Community.

And I'm working on a film score for an Icelandic film, a documentary called *Draumalandið*, or *Dreamland*, based on the book by Andri Snær Magnason. Those are the recent projects at the moment.

Then, I've just been working on a Sam Amidon record, because he was staying here for Iceland Airwaves. So we used the time to record much of his second album. It's probably going to be ready sometime very soon.

Recently also we finished a Nico Muhly album that was released this year. There's so much that I'm probably forgetting, like, half of it. [laughs]

DG: What are the challenges of running a recording studio?

VS: It's complicated, actually, to operate it as a workshop, a personal space that you live in, and also a commercial space. So it's challenging to keep it the way I want it just for myself, and then to open the doors for everyone else and make it a comfortable and easy place for them. But luckily I don't have to run the studio on my own any more. I have other people working with me on that.

DG: And how did you select the artists who are on your label?

VS: It really happened quite organically. When I was working a lot out in New York I had started thinking seriously about starting the label because I kept coming across projects that I was really interested in working on.

I had met Nico Muhly around that time and was really interested in working on his music. To him the idea of even making a studio album didn't exist, you know, because he's from the world of classical composers where you write for a performance, or for the stage, or for a specific group that is performing your work. He hadn't really thought about the idea of making an album, but to me that was the obvious thing. I wanted people to hear his music on a record, properly recorded, and I thought I had some ideas that would be exciting to add to his music.

At the same time, Ben Frost had been moving to Iceland from Australia. We had been friends for a while and I really liked his music, and he was in a similar situation: he didn't have a label. So it just made sense with these three people – me, Ben and Nico – to just create a label around that.

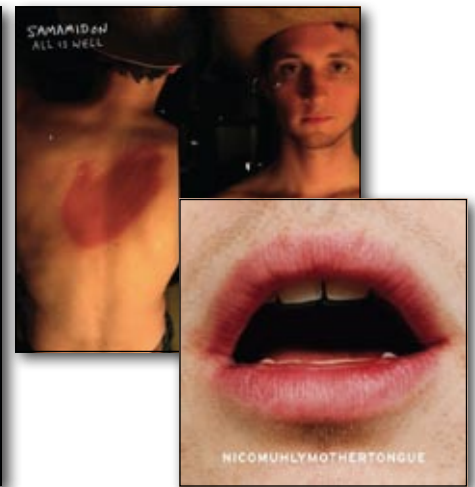
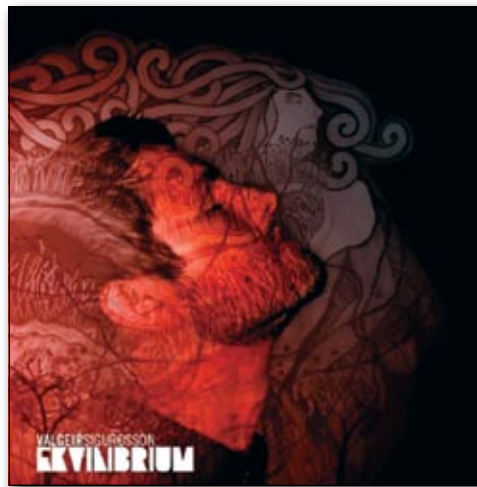
And so that's how the idea started. And *Speaks Volumes*, Nico Muhly's CD, was the first one we put out. Then the label just kind of grew. I had no idea what I was doing, so I just had to find out what it is that you do when you put out an album internationally, because we quickly got international distribution. So then we had to figure out how to promote the album, because nobody knows Nico and... well, that was in 2006.

DG: All of the Bedroom Community albums seem to be of solo artists. Was that a conscious decision?

VS: Yeah, it was, actually, at the beginning. That was one of the things we talked about as being important for the identity of the label: being a home for solo composers or performers. But I don't think that's going to be an eternal rule. So there might be a band on the label sometime. But the problem is that bands are bands, and they only exist for so long. They come and go.

At the beginning, we also made a strong point of having everyone's faces on the album covers, so that everyone's identity is up front. This is one of the things that electronic labels, especially, have been hiding in the last ten or fifteen years. You have all these white covers with a little tree on the front, and then someone's name but it's not his actual name, it's just a made-up name. So you never know who the musician is, and you have no personal involvement with the music.

We wanted to promote the person, the



personality behind the music, because we place ourselves somewhere in the world of electronic, new classical, experimental music. And folk, new folk, or whatever you call these things with Sam Amidon, who is the latest artist to join the label. He had been using a scrambled version of his name, "Samamidon," put together as one word. So it's now "Sam Amidon," two separate names.

DG: Given that you are the only Icelander on your label, how has your label been received in Iceland?

VS: People are confused, I think (laughs). They don't really understand it.

DG: Because it's directed internationally and not to the local Icelandic community?

VS: Maybe, yeah, that's got something to do with it. I mean, we are clearly an Icelandic label and we've been that from day one. The music is created here, we operate from here and this is kind of the place that connects us all when we make music.

But I don't expect people to necessarily understand why an Icelandic label has Australian and American artists on it. But at the time when I was starting the label I had been away a lot. I had almost spent at least half my time away from Iceland, so I didn't have many connections with Icelandic artists that I wanted to put on the label, which has a much wider scope, maybe, than just limiting the label to Icelandic artists.

DG: How long did it take you to do Ekvilibríum and what is that album about?

VS: It took me a long time to produce, because I had been working on a lot of other projects in studio, as hired

engineer or programmer or producer. So, every time I had some free time, I wanted to get back into making the album, and then I got sucked into another project. I left half-finished ideas somewhere on my hard drive for a while, and then I came back to them sometime later, so the songs developed over a few years.

And one of the reasons for the title, *Ekvilibríum*, is that I was kind of finding the balance between working as a collaborator with other people and putting more time into my own music, figuring out how I could combine these things without compromising one or the other. So that's one of the reasons I thought it would be the perfect title for the album.

DG: What are your future plans?

VS: I have an album that is coming out on the label in 2009 that features the Kronos Quartet and a Finnish group called Klusters. And that kind of collaboration can exist as an extension of the label, but we're not going to have all these people involved as an integral part of the label, you know.

DG: Is there an overall esthetic that all of your artists share or that you seek to promote with this label.

VS: Yeah, it has to be kick-ass great, everything we do (laughs), that's the esthetic.

*You can hear the music of Bedroom Community's recording artists at the label's MySpace page: www.myspace.com/bedroomcommunity, including excerpts from the albums *Speaks Volumes* and *Mothertongue* by Nico Muhly, *Theory of Machines* by Ben Frost, *All is Well* by Sam Amidon and *Ekvilibríum* by Valgeir Sigurðsson.*