DENNIS DREW / 10,000 MANIACS

There Were No Mistakes in That Room

Interview by Shawn DiLorenzo

When Dennis Drew brought a new piece to his bandmates in 10,000 Maniacs, he skipped straight to the ending. That ending, played with a different rhythm, became the verse of “Trouble Me.”

Drew, who plays organ and piano on the recording, helped start 10,000 Maniacs in Jamestown in 1981. He later founded WRFA, the city’s community radio station. We asked him about sharing unfinished work and where a Chautauqua County reader might look for a story.

INK HOUSE

Thinking back to the early days of making music in Jamestown, what did it give you personally? Is any of that feeling still there when you sit at the keyboard just for yourself?

DENNIS DREW

The early days were about camaraderie. It was US against the World in 1981. It was fun. Instinctual. It gave me Freedom and therefore confidence. The reason I still write and play is because of that confidence.

INK HOUSE

You co-wrote “Trouble Me” with Natalie Merchant. Could you take us inside your part in creating it, particularly how its music and words came together? Feel free to choose another song if there’s a story behind it you’d especially like to share.

DENNIS DREW

In 1988/89, I was listening to world music a lot. Our previous producer, Joe Boyd, had a world music label (Hannibal) that was distributed by our label, Elektra. He gave me a bunch of cool CDs. So I was listening to some traditional based music from Bulgaria (or Romania?) and loving the chord changes and different rhythms/time signatures.

So I wrote this elaborate song structure with a coda based on “pivot” tones or pivot chords, all in 3/4 time. When I brought it to the band, for some reason I skipped the entire body of the song and just played that pivot tone coda. I automatically started playing it in 4/4 and added a 2/4 measure out of some kind of inspiration. So that coda became the verse in the song that became “Trouble Me.” I added some rather typical chord changes for a chorus and BOOM. Research met luck and inspiration.

A LISTENING NOTE FROM INK HOUSE

A coda is the closing passage of a piece. A pivot note or chord gives the ear something familiar to hold on to as the harmony changes. Try tapping “ONE two three” for 3/4, then “ONE two three four” for 4/4. The measure of 2/4 he added lasts just two beats.

Listen to “Trouble Me” | Blind Man’s Zoo, 1989

INK HOUSE

When you bring an unfinished idea to the other members of 10,000 Maniacs, what kind of response helps you feel comfortable keeping it alive and exploring it? We have readers who are working up the courage to share their first pieces, and that moment of letting someone else in can feel like a big step.

DENNIS DREW

It is a very big step, but editors that you trust are essential. We were together all the time and developed great love and trust for each other. We certainly threw away more ideas than we kept. YOU CANNOT BE AFRAID TO FAIL. We got to a point where we genuinely felt safe in our rehearsal space. There were no mistakes in that room.

There is a technique for improvisation called “Yes, and…” This is when you say, “Yes, that’s good, and we could do it faster, or slower, or add this chord, or hey, how about this…” Just a positive vibe. But it’s very important to develop a relationship with your “editor.” Maybe not your wife or someone who’s afraid to hurt your feelings because hurt feelings can definitely happen. Teachers, coaches and editors have to tell the hard truth. After massaging it a bit.

In all art, there is mostly rejection and failure. If you can’t take it, then just quit now. You have to write bad songs before you can write good ones. Always be learning and getting better. It’s WORK. Do the work. There are not very many geniuses out there, but there are many great craftsmen. Work. Learn. A good writer is a good reader. Accept criticism. It will make you better.

INK HOUSE

Is there a book, poem, or song that has made you want to create something of your own? What about it stayed with you?

DENNIS DREW

Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Tom Waits as songwriters. Shelley, Keats and Byron as poets and Steven Millhauser’s short stories. I read mostly nonfiction. I know the endings. Does the prose jump off the page? That’s what I like.

INK HOUSE

You helped establish WRFA and make room for local voices in Jamestown. Imagine someone here in Chautauqua County says to you, “I’d love to write something, but my life is too ordinary.” Where would you encourage them to look for a story?

DENNIS DREW

Look inside your everyday life. It’s the singer, not the song. Just about everyone feels their life is “Ordinary.” Plots don’t really matter. Tone, setting, characters and the ability to write good sentences are much more important. If you describe a walk down the street, make it interesting. Life is extraordinary. Observe it. Describe it. You are Extraordinary. Describe your feelings. It’s not what you say as much as how you say it.

FROM INK HOUSE / A WRITING PROMPT

Picture a street you know by heart. Write three sentences about one person you might pass there. Let one small detail tell us how it feels to be on that street today.

10,000 Maniacs Band photo gallery