

from: Some Thoughts on Music and Film Henry Kaiser

The Visionary Art of Jordan Belson

Interviewers usually ask me two particular questions about my music. However they almost never print my true answers. The reason for this has a lot to do with the almost total obscurity of one of America's greatest filmmakers, Jordan Belson. I'd like to elucidate, to shine some light, on Mr. Belson and his films, which have become truly difficult to view since he withdrew his film prints from circulation back in 1978. He's continued to produce amazing films since then and some of his films have finally become available on DVD at the time of this writing.

Interviewers typically begin by asking me about my influences. I'll go on for a while mentioning Derek Bailey, György Ligeti, B. B. King, Jerry Garcia, world music, country blues, free jazz, etc. But then I tell them that my favorite artist in any medium and the most influential of my heroes is the filmmaker Jordan Belson. This is invariably met with a blank look followed by my enthusiastic exposition on Belson's work and its effect upon me that is without fail deleted from the interview by the time it gets into print.

Belson, a long-time resident of San Francisco's North Beach district, now in his '80s, has made more than forty short, abstract or non-objective films since 1947. In the '60s and early '70s it was fairly common to see them in programs of experimental films the world over. He makes his films in his tiny apartment (that he has been living in for longer than this guitarist has been alive) on a specially constructed optical bench. The films are 100% special effects. Sometimes cosmic, sometimes sub-molecular, they are like abstract paintings come to gentle and furious life. Simultaneously windows into the depths of internal spiritual processes and mega-galactic interplay, the films resemble fantastic living creatures of light that briefly enter this dimension for each screening. Even Belson's early work surpasses what George Lucas' ILM team needs millions of dollars to accomplish. Belson's work was a crucial influence on the psychedelic ending sequence to Kubrick's, *2001, A Space Odyssey*. Director Phil Kaufman hired him to do some effects used in *The Right Stuff*. Belson has been around for a long time, but he keeps the lowest of profiles.

I was fortunate to see his work when I was in my teens at about the same time that I began to play guitar. Belson's artistic innovation was a big inspiration to try to create my own personal forms of musical expression. He created images that transcended the film medium and I wished to do likewise with sonic imagery. He created his own visual language and grammar and he had a lot to say with it. Visually his films are as exquisite

as anything in nature, chaotic or symmetrical. I've kept up with his work over the years and have seen most of his films many times. It's simply my favorite art in all terms: style, technique and content.

From 1957–60, in collaboration with the musician Henry Jacobs, Belson staged one hundred “Vortex Concerts” in San Francisco’s Morrison Planetarium. Those unprecedented presentations of abstract sounds and images are still talked about today. My own ten-year series of concerts in Oakland’s Chabot Planetarium owed a great debt to those first explorations.

The second question that music journalists usually ask is, “What do you think about while you are improvising?” Playing music for me is largely an internally visual experience. Even though it may look like I’m smiling at the drummer or the piano player, inside my mind, and without the addition of recreational chemicals, I’m drifting through glowing clouds of light among coruscating fractal and geometric forms that shimmer in and out of existence. Rivers of light, like oceanic streams of phosphorescent plankton inflamed by the wakes of playful sea lions, dance in time to the music before it happens; giving me my silent cues, like the clouds a glider pilot watches to catch updrafts. It’s pretty much like I have a Jordan Belson movie running inside my head all the time, but it’s easiest to look at when I’m playing music and on the edge of some kind of natural trance state.

When you were a pre-school kid did you, like me, lay in your dark bedroom at night and press on the lids of your eyes to generate phosphene patterns of internal light that danced in your head before going to sleep each night? If you can remember those images—have you ever thought of the similarities that they bear to spiritual and psychedelic art through the ages? From a Tibetan mandala, to a Fillmore poster, to modern computer art, to a Rothko painting there is a not-so-hidden connection between the way our brains are wired and man’s quest for spiritual understanding of the universe through visual art. When I saw my first Belson film during my second year of college, I immediately recognized this and was nonverbally transformed by his work to see all sorts of connections that I’d never seen before.

Belson is one of the most original artists I know of in any medium. He created a new art form and the techniques to realize it. But beyond that, the content of his films is deep, sublime and enlightening. The films mean something, they communicate profound knowledge in dynamic, moving, visual terms. Anyone can immediately access the beauty and surface content of his work. I think Jordan has somehow found a way to project his many years of meditative spiritual quest and research outward onto filmstock. Words fail

in describing the richness of Belson's fantastic imagery. See the films; they will illuminate you.

One of his works *Mysterious Journey* sums up many of the content concerns of entire filmic output. There is no better introduction to his work and at thirty minutes it's his longest film. After several movements that seem to depict Belson's lifelong spiritual journey on earth, the imagery moves through a death experience into a *Tibetan Book of the Dead* transitional phase and then, penultimately, into clouds of iridescent soul specks rising up over the earth like cosmic fireflies; through the heavens to ultimately meet God. But after that there's more: an eagle superimposed over the infinite depths of interstellar space banks off into the stars. At the same time its iconography seems to project both "So long," and "Let's go, follow me if you can. What's next?" Suddenly it's obvious that the journey is just now beginning. That kind of attitude is how I aim to feel each time I pick up the guitar. I want to follow the music where I can and films have provided lots of interesting guidelines and advice for this pursuit.

Besides the cosmic and colorful synaesthetic imagery, there are other aspects to Belson's filmmaking that directly influence my approach to improvisation. Rhythm, melody, and harmony have always been the least interesting aspects of music to me. I've always been more interested in timbre, shape, timing, space, emptiness, structure, emotion, color, and expression. Since I came from working in a film production background, before I ever picked up a guitar or became involved in music, I already had a deep appreciation of these things in the filmic medium. I don't know in what year you will be reading this brief essay, but do take a look on the internet and see if you can find any of Jordan Belson's films on DVD. Besides Belson there are quiet a few other filmmakers who have influenced my musical thoughts and approaches in these areas. A few of these artists would be: Akira Kurosawa, Andrey Tarkovsky, Preston Sturges, Sam Fuller, Douglas Sirk, Kon Ichikawa, Masahiro Shinoda, Ishiro Honda, Art Clokey, Nagisa Oshima, Masaki Kobayashi, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Michael Powell, Hideo Gosha, Kihachi Okamoto, James Whitney, Michael Snow, Pat O'Neil, Leo McCary, The Fleischer Brothers, The Marx Brothers, Satyajit Ray, Nicholas Ray, Anthony Mann, John Alton, Robert Altman, John Ford, Stanley Kubrick, Jacques Tournier, Billy Wilder, Robert Wise, Alan Resnais, Yasujiro Ozu, Werner Herzog, and John Pierre Melville.

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Henry Kaiser Biography: Widely recognized as one of the most creative and innovative guitarist, improvisers, and producers in the fields of rock, jazz and experimental music, California-based musician Henry Kaiser is one of the most extensively recorded as well, having appeared on more than 220 different albums. Mr. Kaiser not only produces and contributes to a staggering number of recorded projects, he performs frequently throughout the USA, Europe and Japan, with several regular groupings as well as solo guitar concerts and concerts of freely improvised music with a host of diverse instrumentalists including Herbie Hancock, Jerry Garcia, Terry Riley, Mike Keneally, Michael Stipe, Jerry Garcia, Wadada Leo Smith, John Zorn, Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Harvey Mandel, Richard Thompson, David Lindley, and Cecil Taylor. As one of the “first generation” of American free improvisers, Kaiser has helped unfetter the guitar from the conventions of genre-bound techniques, but his instrumental virtuosity and technological breakthroughs are always deployed in the service of deep and immediate personal expression. Some of his musical sources include traditional blues, South East Asian traditions, Classical North Indian, and Korean shamanic music, free jazz, free improvisation, American steel-string concert guitar, and 20th century classical, but he also draws creatively from other abiding interests, which for Mr. Kaiser include information theory, experimental cinema, mathematics, experimental literature and scuba diving. Kaiser has traveled to Antarctica four times as a member of the US Antarctic Program. Each time he has worked as research diver beneath the twenty-foot thick ice of the Ross Sea. In 2007 he returned from his most recent Antarctic deployment with director Werner Herzog; where Henry functioned as underwater cameraman and producer of a new Herzog feature film for Discovery Channel International’s theatrical release unit. Henry’s collaborations with Werner Herzog have included the soundtracks for *Grizzly Man* and *Encounters at the End of the World*; as well as cinematography on *The Wild Blue Yonder*.