

Dirk Campbell's Origins

By [Sonic Control](#) / August 10, 2008

[Dirk Campbell](#) is a composer who has used such sounds to help craft out musical compositions for 12 film scores, 14 different television programs for the BBC, and numerous commercials including Bailey's Irish Cream, Land Rover, and Hyundai. As a performer, he has participated in numerous concerts and stage presentations, and for movie lovers, he performed in the recordings of *The 13th Warrior* and *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*.

But Dirk Campbell is also a composer whose creativity extends beyond notes to creating sample libraries, not of orchestral instruments, but ancient instruments. His newest collection is called Origins, and it's a fitting title for our inaugural episodes. Tonight, we interview Dirk to get a feel for the man and the mission. In succeeding episodes, Dirk will take us back into pre-history as you'll learn not only about the instruments of early man, from the bone flute, to the brass of the Roman Legions, but also what goes in to recording them.

SC – 1950 to 1961, 1962, you grew up in Egypt, and then Kenya. What was that like?

DC– Although I don't remember anything of Egypt where I was born, Kenya during the colonial period was in some ways like the American Wild West: perceived as dangerous to white people, quite understandably because we had moved in on other people's territory without being invited. In fact that was mostly paranoia. Africans (those who had not been corrupted by white culture) were trusting, generous and loyal. My parents were on the naive rather than the paranoid side, with a love of native culture which few whites had in those days. We lived near Nairobi, the capital of the recently-created colony, and I was educated in all-white schools, but I nevertheless got to experience a good deal of tribal music at e.g. the wedding of a local Kikuyu chief's daughter, at a ferry crossing or just a guy playing xylophone on the street. The choral music of the Samburu and the Nandi impacted on me profoundly, and I still feel it as among the deepest expressions of the human spirit.

SC – When did your love for music begin, and when did this fascination, or passion, for ancient instruments and ethnic instruments begin? Did one come before the other, or was there some dove tailing?

DC –My grandfather was a professional composer with a fascination for folksong and Gergorian plainchant, so my interest in the ethnic and the ancient comes through that I suppose, and was always there to some degree in my childhood. I got interested in the distinction between 'drawing room folk music' and genuine folk music while I was in my 20s as I began to hear the difference between the rather manicured folk music I had grown up with and the real thing. My early exposure to non-western musics also enabled me to hear and appreciate the different 'languages' of musical tradition; the enthusiasm to put a lot of effort into learning many traditions is in my case a desire to communicate in wider fields and extend myself into them, but it's also falling in love with the unfamiliar for its own sake.

SC – When did you actually start music lessons and what was your instrument?

DC – About 8 years old; piano. Though I taught myself pop guitar too from about the age of 10.

SC – Still a youngster, you moved from Africa to London. What was that transition like? Was it difficult? Did you miss Africa? Or was Africa a season of your life, from which you were ready for the next step?

DC – No, I wasn't ready and never quite got over it really! Kenya was home for me, not the place my parents referred to as 'home' which I knew nothing about except what I'd been taught at school. It was one of a number of great wrenches and lessons in letting go. But when you're young you're adaptable, and you get used to new circumstances quickly.

SC– You were accepted into the Royal College of Music where you studied composition with Edwin Roxburgh, who as a young man had studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. Did he ever talk about his experience as a student with Boulanger? And if he did, how did you see how that impacted the way he taught you?

DC – He never did talk about that, no. He wasn't a particularly conversational type. He talked about the work of contemporary composers of the time, particularly Boulez, but I never learned to like their music. I never liked Schönberg and his school either. I have to admit I didn't learn very much about contemporary composition from Roxburgh, though he taught me some useful things about classical structure, like how to write an examination fugue. I won £50 in a competition from that (which must be about £1000 in today's money!). I held then and still hold that Stravinsky and Messiaen were the true musical originals of the 20th century. The Rite of Spring is so filmic, and contains such a wide range of energies and moods. Its effect on the film score industry has been enormous. It's still being profitably mined today, nearly 100 years after it was written.

SC – What were the strengths of studying at the Royal College of Music, and what were the weaknesses. By weaknesses, I mean this – when you got out on the streets and had to earn a living, what was missing or not taught enough that you discovered you needed to know? I ask that as a Berklee graduate, and as someone who has friends in Los Angeles who graduated from Juilliard, who dropped out of Juilliard, who graduated from North Texas State and other schools, got to Los Angeles, and discovered that we as a group were way behind the power curve, and really had to hustle to catch up with what we hadn't been taught.

DC – The RCM was not a great place to learn composition, because, amazingly, there was no qualification in composition, so nothing to work towards. In performance you had the diploma, but no-one was preparing students there for the wider or more creative world, only for the classical concert hall or the opera house. I was no good at that, and consequently gave myself an inferiority complex. All the people I know personally who went to the RCM had the same experience as me. If they succeeded in music they did so despite the RCM, not because of it. (Which is not to say that there are not large numbers of musicians who succeeded because of it, just that I don't know them.) That doesn't answer your question I know, but I'm not the best person to ask.

SC– When you were at RCM, what do you wish you had paid more attention to?

DC – The girls. Some of them were stunning, and I was too morally fastidious to reciprocate their interest (I had just started out on my first marriage). Apart from that, I could have made a lot more use of the students' musical talents. As a composer I could have got to know the other students, find out what made them tick, worked in a more collaborative way. But I had big alienation problems. As Oscar Wilde said, the tragedy of youth is that it is wasted on the young.

SC– You graduated in '74, but didn't begin writing full time as a composer until 15 years later in 1989. What kinds of things were you doing during those 15 years and at what point did you decide that you wanted to compose full time?

DC – After the RCM I went back into progressive rock for a year, earned no money, and then got work as a graphic designer. I went through a few jobs in that capacity, nothing to speak of. Meanwhile I was doing a bit of non-serious, non-challenging composing with a small group of friends. My spiritual confrere David Anderson was completing his first animated film at the British Film School in Beaconsfield. As we were next-door neighbours I offered to write the music for it. With the arrogance of youth I told him to leave it to me. I had no idea the film would win that year's BAFTA for best animated short, but that film was the launch of my career as a composer. It was a bit like the Wright Brothers' early efforts though: took a long time to get off the ground and stay there. Meantime my graphic design career was going nowhere in a downward direction, so when I was offered the opportunity to write commercials I jumped at it.

SC– You've written a number of commercials. What's Dirk Campbell's Top 5 rules for dealing with clients and ad agencies?

DC – People always want to know this, it's like the Holy Grail or something. Everybody you ask will probably tell you something different, but here's what I've worked out. Any one of these principles can bring you success in advertising. All five will guarantee it. One: Advertising agency people are all neomaniacs, so be new on the scene. Obviously you can't sustain this for very long – unless you reinvent yourself. Two: be able to convince them that you have a lot going for you. Winning awards helps, or being successful in other fields such as rock music. Three: don't try to be original, leave that to the visual guys; advertising is a visual medium. It's usually the boringly obvious music that wins the pitch. Four: Get them to put up a comp track that works and then you won't have to interpret the brief, which you can't because it's written by non-musicians. Five: a friend in the business is worth more than a thousand showreels. Two friends are worth more than ten thousand.

SC – Contrast dealing with clients and ad agencies to dealing with producers, directors and stage managers.

DC – You mean in film or theatre? I've never written a major release film score, only art films and documentaries. But all the above rules apply apart from the first; in film and theatre it's the opposite: they won't employ a composer unless he or she is established, by which time in advertising you are boring. And then they tend to be more loyal, whereas there's no loyalty whatsoever in advertising. In theatre and dance they'll accept whatever you do, but the money's terrible, whereas the money's great in advertising but you have to win pitches and go through at least ten levels of demos.

SC– Somewhere along the way, you discovered computers and sequencing software. Tell us about that.

DC – Computerisation was something I was forced to learn after a fire destroyed everything I owned including my Roland W30 workstation. The W30 was a 12 bit 30kh sampler and very basic sequencer embodied in a midi keyboard. I learned to love it, and even wrote a 1-hour piece called Music From a Round Tower on it, using the Roland 12 bit sample library. Long before that, when I went into composing professionally I had no idea about technology. I would write everything on the piano. Then I got a 4-track cassette deck and multi-tracked myself playing hand-drums and marimba and stuff. Then I got the W30 and thought I was all teched-up. The music I wrote before was much better, however, because technology has a tendency to take away your intelligence. (Unless you had none to start with of course, then it's a step up.) Getting the Mac and learning first Cubase and then Logic Audio was a big mental effort for me, and I still have a tendency to forget that for everyone else it's no big deal; the musical ideas are what count.

SC – Is sequencing a blessing, a curse, or a little of both, and why?

DC – It's just a writing tool. A very complicated writing tool. It gives you a lot of control of the end product, which is good. The problem I have with it is the limitations it places on me as a composer. It has actually taken real music backwards in many senses because it's like painting by numbers; what you can do with a real instrument is infinitely greater than what you can do with a set of samples which are aimed at the broadest possible user group, i.e. the one with the least imagination. Writing notation and instructions and relying on the (admittedly more expensive) skills of a group of musicians always gives you a better end result than relying on your own programming skills. Which is why so many composers seem to opt for programmed sounds rather than instrumental sounds. Then there's the whole hip-hop thing which takes reliance on technology to the most primitive level possible, in my opinion.

SC – What led you into learning and performing on folk wind instruments?

DC – Falling in love with the sounds of traditional instruments and the various languages of traditional music. To play duduk like an Armenian, or gaida like a Thracian, or uilleann pipes like an Irishman, takes a lot of sensitivity and careful analysis, a lot of time and practice. But some inner force pushed me on; I think it's the same one that drives any performer. I just heard and fell in love.

SC – How important are sample libraries in your work as a composer?

DC – Not very, because I play a lot of the things myself – percussion, winds, lutes and fiddles etc. I use my own sample libraries quite a lot, because most of the music I am asked to write is in those areas and it's a good shortcut for demo-ing purposes. When I need the real guys on, say, oud or rebab, I book them. As to the general, I don't get asked to write music featuring saxophone, electric guitar, harmonica or techno beats, or not these days anyway, so it doesn't concern me. I have used the Peter Siedlacek orchestra in the past but I have to say that the Roland JV series orchestral samples are just as good, better in some cases. I know all about the Vienna library and its realistic programming features. Next time I am asked to write a score for a major release and a budget to match, I will acquire it.

SC – When did you decide you wanted to create a sample library?

DC – When someone suggested to me that I ought to, about ten years ago. It took me a year or so to put World Winds together. The first company I approached, ZeroG, took it and then sat on it for two years. Dave Stewart suggested I get out of the contract and offer the library to Ilio which I did, and very thankful too as Ilio believed in it wholeheartedly and marketed it very well.

SC – Why does anyone in their right mind, want to put themselves through the torture of creating a sample library?

DC – You might ask a similar question of a Himalayan mountaineer. Some people are just hard-wired that way. I have a terrible head for heights, so I do sample libraries. I quite like the obsessive work involved actually. And the feeling that I am doing something no-one else can do in quite the same way. And the anticipation of all the ecstatic reviews...

SC – When my wife was working on her masters in film composition at Bournemouth University, the general consensus between the students was that the way to wealth was to create a sample library. Now that you have two on the market your advice is...

DC – The way things are going there is an exponential curve of more media, more shows, more need for music. At the same time the cost and quality of everything is falling and music fees are falling along with it. So people are looking for more and more shortcuts all the time. The growth in the sample library market is one aspect of that. As there are so many of them and people are drowning in the tide of new

titles, product marketing is as always the key to success. I'm no expert on that, but in my own case aiming at a niche market has worked. Though I wouldn't say it's necessarily the way to wealth.

SC – Give us the thought process that goes into planning a sample CD library.

DC – World Winds was fairly straightforward, it was just me playing my collection of wind instruments in no particular order. Origins was broader, it reflected my interest in ancient tradition and history, so I first wrote a list of the sort of sounds that I would like to have available for this purpose, and what could be useful to evoke the distant past, like choral groups and sound effects of various kinds, as well as instruments that fitted the concept. Plus some fun stuff like playing on grass blades that could be slowed down to pterodactyl noises.

SC – After you've done the recorded performance, what process do you go through to turn that into a completed sampled instrument?

DC – I think of the keyboard in two ways: one as a musical instrument playing the 12-semitone octave; two, as a device for triggering a range of pre-recorded phrases. I edit the samples in Logic Audio and then import them into the EXS24 sampler where I map them using key assigns, velocity switches, pans etc. The multisamples are created with various different attacks, usually three or four types which can be alternated with velocity switching. I assign the performance phrases to a separate instrument.

SC – Is creating a sample library a passion, a project or a kind of obsession?

DC – I wouldn't call it a passion or obsession at the outset, though it gets like that once the momentum is up! To start with it's a project.

SC – Having done two libraries, will you ever do a third?

DC – I am planning a follow-up to World Winds which will consist mostly of phrase loops. I'm fascinated by the Apple Garage Band utility that automatically pitch shifts and time stretches phrases to the tempo and key selected. Quick gratification, I know, but that's the way things are moving. I have a number of new instruments such as launeddas and zampogna that are not featured on World Winds and am looking forward to applying them creatively to sample library presentation. But I will also be contributing a lot of loopable phrases on old favourites such as uilleann pipes, kaval, duduk, bansuri, suling etc. I'd also like to do choral loops such as Pygmy, Nandi, Samburu, Corsican, Epirot etc, but maybe that's a separate project.

SC – As a composer and as a developer, what do you see overall are the strengths of sample libraries, and what do you see overall are their weaknesses?

DC – The gorgeous thing about sampling is it's an open-ended technology that makes all kinds of sounds available for anyone to use in an easily accessible way. I certainly benefited from it. I would never have known as much as I do about Japanese traditional music if it had not been for the Roland W30 library. The main fallout of sample libraries is that music commissioners now expect everything to be demo'd as near as dammit to the final sound. Since one can only demo using samples, the final sound is often compromised by the limitations of the samples. But it is up to the musician concerned to push the boundaries and take him/herself out of the comfort zone. Same as it ever was, really.

SC – You've also recorded two audio CDs. As a husband, and a dad, what's it take to make a fulltime living in music?

DC – Winston Churchill was recorded talking to an old man who came up with this gem: ‘I have experienced a lot of worrying things in my life, most of which never happened’. Insecurity. It’s only worrying if you worry about it. Also it’s important to have a wife that keeps telling you how great you are.

SC – What business lessons have you learned in music?

DC – Talking of my wife, her favourite word of the month is ‘oxymoron’. The phrase ‘music business’ is a good example in my experience. I have been able to earn money from music, but I have never been able to make music for money. The music that launched me on my professional career was the score to David Anderson’s Dreamland Express. I did it as a favour, and was not paid. On other occasions I have done the same. It worked for me – I’m not saying that it would work for everyone. But the thing is that as an artist you cannot be defined by normal business rules. The most important musicians and composers that I know of – and artists of all disciplines – just do what they love to do, without attachment to the outcome. You may succeed that way, or you may not, but personally I don’t know any other way.

SC– Finally, a scenario. You’ve lived a good life, and you’re now retired. You’re asked to take over a music school and you can do anything you want with the subjects taught. Based on your life experiences, what’s the curriculum?

DC – This would be a very big responsibility and would require very careful, serious thought over a long period of time. But as a quick response I offer the following:

My ideal music school would not operate on a single assumption and offer one prescription for all, the way they do at, for example, the Royal College of Music or the Fame Academy. My agenda would be to broaden the scope of human awareness. Experience has proved to me that most musicians in various parts of the world are not aware of musical traditions in other parts of the world. I believe that all musicians would benefit from exposure to different frames of reference. If, for example, a New York jazz saxophonist were to listen to a shenai player, his or her horizons would be widened, especially if he/she was also given some insight into the musical language of India, so different from that of American jazz. There is a superficial attitude which says that it’s all improvisation, so what does it matter? This attitude ignores the fact that all traditions, all musical languages, have developed over centuries and each has a complex syntax. To expand my present moment and my geographical location I have to be willing to let go of the assumption that my language and my syntax is the ‘norm’. By doing that I have the chance of extending my awareness to include other languages and all other human beings. That would be the aim of my school.

SC – Dirk, we thank you.

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