

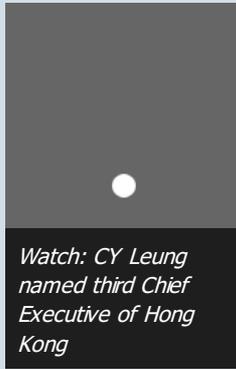


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Death Cab For Cutie's Asian Fixation

By Kyle Mullin



The indie troupe's sonic mastermind, Chris Walla (on the left of the picture), touches on the criss-crossed philosophies that will inform the band's March 9 Yun Feng Theater gig.

He's mastered piano riffs, guitar chords, synth codes and keys. Up next— calligraphy.

Maybe not quite, but Chris Walla has always drawn on China for inspiration. That Mandarin fixation sets itself far apart from any of his other endeavours—playing and producing for indie super troupe Death Cab For Cutie, or hopping behind the studio mixing boards for countless other all star songwriters like The Decemberists and Tegan and Sara.

To tap into that Chinese muse, he needed nothing more than his father's briefcase and business plans.

"My dad spent a good chunk of my childhood in China and he always loved it," the songwriter and producer says of his father's Far East business trips while working for the Boeing Airline Company in the mid to late 1980s. "He really got into the speed and the pace and the detail of how the Chinese were learning and how they were doing business."

The same could be said for the younger Walla's level of focus in recent years, as if his boundless ambition sprouted from some foreign place that was totally exotic to his peers. In the past decade he has produced, engineered and mixed literally dozens of albums—not only all of Deathcab's releases, but also an eclectic batch ranging from Canadian classic rock balladeer Gord Downie's solo opus The Grand Bounce, to a blast of lo-fi religion tinged alt punk dubbed Fucking A, courtesy of Oregon's The Thermals. And, unlike most shoe gazing indie rockers, Walla has almost completely revamped his own band's sound and even its music making approach.



Deathcab almost dominated the alt music world half a decade ago with its melodic, melancholy flavour of indie pop. But on their latest release, 2011's Codes and Keys, lives up to its name by ditching raw acoustic strumming in

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favour of intricate synthesizer notes.

"The guitar and drums are very impulsive instruments, you hit them and they make a sound," Walla says of the more traditional instruments that he used to write Deathcab's biggest hits. "Sometimes that's great, if the moment is right and you capture that moment, that can be really exciting. But at a certain point that can breed impatience too, and you end up committing to things that maybe you should have thought through more completely."

The best example he can think of is "You Are A Tourist," a highlight from

halfway through the new album. Its swelling electronica eclipses singer Ben Gibbard's earnest delivery. But if the frontman had had his way, the song would have turned out completely differently.

"Ben brought 'You Are A Tourist,' in as an acoustic demo. And while it was only reasonably formed, it was clear the song was really, really good. But if we'd just crashed through it as a rock song, it might not have come together," Walla says of the fresh tune, adding that he wasn't interested in retreading the minimalist ground Deathcab already covered on their last release, 2008's more subdued *Narrow Stairs*. "The presentation felt to me like it was all wrong, and that there was a place we could get it to where it could make more sense. Ruling out guitars on the front end and trying to figure out how to get to that place, that was the thing that allowed us to get there on the whole album."

They reached that sonic destination via a Korg MS-20 synthesizer, which was first released in the 1980s.

"It's got a keyboard on the bottom, and the rest of its body sort of takes a right angle turn up, so that the console is sort of staring at you from the front," Walla says in fluent geek jargon, before elaborating endlessly about what happens when he faces the device head on. "The high pass and low pass filters on the MS-20 are just amazing, nothing else sounds like those filters. People have tried for years to imitate or model it for the digital world, and no one can seem to do it. That's the sound of the first Daft Punk record, all those filter sweeps where it sounds like it's underwater, then it sort of comes up and pops into focus, then gets really thin, then comes back up again into focus. That's all the MS-20, they used it because it's a really stable, reliable instrument. It's not flakey, it doesn't freak out on you."

He adds the most dependable aspect of such vintage devices isn't that durability but their personality—the distinct subtleties and sonic quirks that bring their notes to life, as if to defy any listeners that dismiss synths as sterile and cold. In fact, Walla says the synthesizers of the 80s create far more organic songs than anything produced in today's Pro Tools, intricate software era.

"With modern production (on computers), you always get to lean on your eyes to tell you whether or not your ears are telling you the truth. I find with 80s synths, old drum machines and sequencers, not having that visual element means you're always making decisions based on what you're hearing and feeling, and never on what you're seeing. And I think it's strange that is now 'unusual,' to make musical decisions based solely on what you're hearing. I find a lot of warmth and comfort in synths for that."

He found more than a comfort zone while recording *Codes and Keys*. Walla unleashed his inner geek during those highly technical sessions. But as the band delved into all that electronica a bizarre crisis broke out, leaving Walla fearing that he'd never record another note.

It started midway through the sessions—a dripping thick enough to make him cringe, each drop rhythmic, as if to fall in sync with the strange new electro-notes Deathcab was creating. Walla was satisfied with the new direction the band was taking, but while listening to the songs his ears bled, literally. He went to a doctor, and after some gentle prodding and the administering of a few drops, the physician sent Walla on his way. At first, he fretted about potentially living every musician's nightmare—a loss of hearing. Then things got worse.

"I was worried about my hearing, until my vision blurred and everything went numb, then I started worrying about everything."

An ambulance rushed him to the hospital, where he immediately underwent a battery of tests like a CAT scan and a spinal tap to ensure his brain wasn't hemorrhaging. The results were all inconclusive, and in no time Walla regained his strength and was released from the hospital as if nothing happened.



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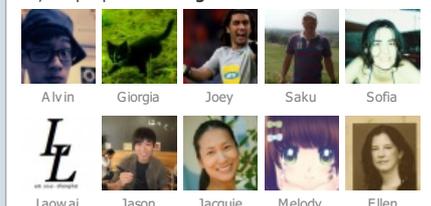
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"It was pretty terrible. And they still don't know what happened, it's kind of a mystery," Walla says of the surreal affliction that left him shaken, but unfettered. "I can't take precautions or worry about it now, at a certain point you just have to live, especially when there's nothing to diagnose."

His eagerness to move on is partially due to the invasive nature of the doctors' tests, especially the spinal tap. The incident may have been disturbing, but it's not the first time he's been intrusively poked and prodded after trying to play his songs.

In 2007 a hard drive brimming with Walla's fresh demos was seized while being couriered across the Canadian-U.S. border. He appealed the case through both official channels and the media. In the latter, he went on record saying "I'm not at Guantanamo or anything like that. I mean my hard drive might be. They could be water-boarding my hard drive right now for all I know."

Eventually Walla managed to touch base with Mike Milne, the spokesperson for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, who was hardly amused by the Deathcab member's wisecracks in the press.

"He was still kind of mad about that," Walla says of the phone call with the border spokesman. "I was able to explain my frustrations, and he was able to explain how the process works. There's still a part of the process that I disagree with—what happened to me was essentially an amendment violation."

Milne told Shanghaiist that the border authority was within every right to temporarily hold Walla's property, despite his gripes.

"The materials were considered 'commercial' merchandise," he says, adding that the border station the courier arrived at was not a location where such objects could pass into the U.S., although he would have realized there were more viable options, if he'd done his homework.

"There is another crossing about one mile from there where commercial merchandise can be entered," Milne added, before stressing that no exceptions were made for, or against, Walla. "There are standard entry procedures required for all commercial merchandise entering the United States."

Walla was glad to dig into the issue with Milne, even if neither ended up swaying the others' opinion with their arguments.

"It was an unreasonable and unfounded search and seizure, although since Sept. 11 that's all up for debate," Walla says of the murky points that he vigorously argued with Milne. He's never shied away from such exchanges—be it with his father over finer Chinese cultural points, fans over the merits of synthesizers, doctors over a mysterious diagnosis, or border customs officials.

"It's always a philosophical debate when any of that stuff comes up, but it's one that I'm happy to have."

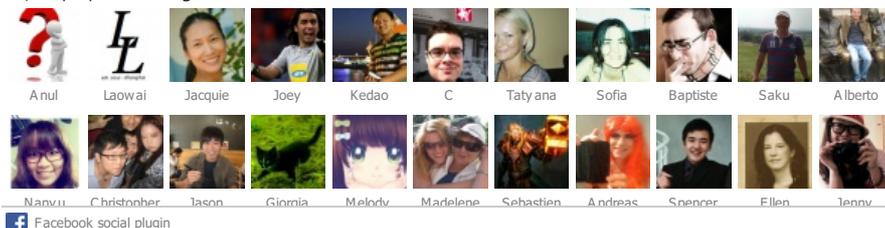
Death Cab For Cutie will perform at the Yun Feng Theater on March 9, as part of the JUE Festival. For more information visit <http://www.spli-t.com/>

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