

[music]

Paul Thies: In the world of popular music and culture, in terms of longevity, daring, breadth, and diversity of projects, he has few peers. From being the frontman for legendary New Wave band and video pioneers, Devo, to a prolific film and TV composer whose credits include *Thor Ragnarok*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, *Happy Gilmore*, and *The Lego Movie*, Mark Mothersbaugh has left his own unique imprint on the world of audio and video media.

Hello, I'm your host Paul Thies. On this episode of *If/When*, I had the privilege of sitting down with Mark to discuss his singular career, which has spanned five decades. We discussed the musical influences and visual aspects of his groundbreaking band, his thoughts on the creative process from both a collaborative and solo viewpoint, the role that technology has played over time in his work, and the transition he made from rock legend to celebrated film composer.

Mark, thank you so much for joining me today. I know you're super busy, and as you mentioned just right before we started, you've got a big party for Devo scheduled there at your studio tomorrow. I can't believe it's been about 50 years, I think, really, since Devo got started in Akron. The early days, I would say, and I think you've said this in some interviews before but that you mentioned that Devo really started more as an art project than as a rock band, or it seemed like that was the intent.

It was much more than just a rock band, but really, it was an art project and really a social commentary project. You mentioned the early 20th century Dadas as influences, but were there other artists or innovators who've been particularly influential on you then when you got started and then also now as a composer in film?

Mark Mothersbaugh: Oh, yes, lots of people. I learned about the Dadas at school at Kent State. I thought if I could ever live in another time, it would be in the '20s and '30s in Europe because I loved all of those art movements that had manifestos. I really liked that. I thought that was great. There were different groups that had different things they concentrated on. I think even through the years up upwards and even backwards, though, it's people like Eno who was an influence for me personally because I was looking for ways to create sounds that reflected what was going on in our culture and that were relevant to what was happening in the world.

I was using synthesizers. I was doing things like [unintelligible 00:03:04] playing them like this, so I could get explosions and caveman sounds and also futuristic ray guns. Then also, Vietnam V-2 rockets, mortar blasts, and explosions, and things like that. Also, just paying attention to commercials and listening to some of the silly sounds they had or some of the different things where you go, "All right, what's that?" A lot of people influenced us. Captain Beefheart influenced Jerry and Bob and me quite a bit.

Jerry was coming at it from more like a blues background. He was in a blues band when we first met. I was looking at Beefheart as this guy who was doing this beatnik poetry over top of very interesting sounds and music that were definitely-- I thought, "Okay, well, this rock and roll's going to be over now," after Zappa and Beefheart and all these other people I was hearing that I thought were really making big changes.

The Italian futurists were an influence. What really made me think I need to come up with new sounds for this time because they were-- Even in the '20s, '30, they were saying, "The contemporary orchestra does not have the sounds required to properly make music for an industrial society."

They were adding in electric fans with a playing card mix with a [unintelligible 00:04:47], and they were using foghorns. They were using atypical instruments and I love that and I thought, "Yes." In my culture, we've got technology now, so we have synthesizers, and that just really made me think about it that way. *Ballet Mécanique*, I think, had a big influence on Devo because of their geometric outfits and the shapes of things. Bob Mothersbaugh found a picture in a little *Lulu* comic of a space alien, and he was wearing a cancelator helmet. It was basically a Devo hat with ear flaps, and I kept drawing it through the years.

I used to draw pictures of Devo on stage and very geometric-shaped outfits. At the same time, Jerry was working at a janitorial supply company where he was helping them put their catalog together, so he was seeing all these things like hazmat outfits that you could buy for \$3.85 a piece. We were looking at all that, and I was drawing pictures of a Devo with that red hat on it years before we actually made them. Those were all kind of influences. If there was a time period I could go back to and be part of, it would be Europe between World War I and World War II, the art scene there.

Paul: A couple of thoughts there. One, you listen to the music. It's actually pretty complex stuff, and obviously, you guys blew up in the punk and New Wave scene and there was so much emphasis on simplicity. I was listening the other day, I was listening to *Timing X off a Duty Now for the Future*. The time signatures are just insane. You mentioned Frank Zappa. I was like, "This could be something that Frank Zappa would have played." That's just the crazy time signature and the constant changes. Especially now when you go back and listen to your catalog, at least I have a greater appreciation of the complexity and how forward-thinking the music was in the context of a "pop song" but then also the visuals.

You guys were so daring with your visual identity at the time. It was ripped jeans and safety pins was really pushing it, of course, but you guys took things to an entirely different level with the costumes and the videos. How did that develop, and what informed that creative process? I know Jerry, for instance, is a video director, but were all the guys on board with doing the outfits and things, or were there any person-- or people are like, "What? You want me to dress like a potato?"

Mark: Oh yes. No, there was none of that. Bob Mothersbaugh, he was the first one of us to direct a film. He wrote and directed a short in high school. It was Chuck Statler who came and visited us. I think it was the winter of '74, I think it was, and he had a copy of *Popular Science*. On the cover was this young couple and they've got this silver 12-inch-- what looks like an LP but it's silver like if you got a platinum album or something. They're happy and they're going with their dancing or something. It says, "Laser discs, everybody will have one by next Christmas." We were like, "Laserdiscs." We started reading about it and we thought, "What a great idea. What if '45s had visual and sound?"

We loved that idea of sound and vision both on one disc and the same with an album. We actually thought we were designing material that would end up being on

laserdiscs when we came out. Of course, laserdiscs, for whatever reason, it's not important at this point why they broke down, but we still kept making films. We had art backgrounds. Chuck Statler directed our first film. Recently, he said, "I remember Jerry saying, 'I don't understand what Mark's trying to do with these crazy sounds, and so I thought, I better record what they're doing now because it probably won't be here next year.'"

[laughter]

It was my two brothers and Jerry and I were the original Devo. My brother, Jim, he was our first drummer, and he probably invented one of the very first electronic drum kits ever. He went on to circuit bending a lot of our gear, a lot of my stuff. A lot of the scenes and things, he fiddled with them, so they weren't just off-the-rack synthesizers. He made them do things that they wouldn't have done. I told him what sounds I was looking for, and he was really into that. The band back then, that was probably the most pure art that we were in our whole history of Devo in the early days. We imagined themes and 1975 version of *Cabaret* in Vienna or France back in the '20s.

Paul: Now, I've got a couple of audience-submitted questions. This first one comes from Bryan Burkhart of Oakland, California. Bryan writes, "I read somewhere that Devo was the first to use MIDI in a live performance. Is that true? What were your creative and technical challenges, and how did you work through them?"

Mark: You know what he's referring to is, in 1981, we were like, "Man, everybody's copying us. They're all doing films, and they're terrible. They're calling them promo videos, and they're terrible. What do we do to stay a step ahead?" I said, "You know what? We're going to do live films with our songs, and we're going to be in them on stage."

In 1981, we designed a stage that was 10 feet deep and only had spots coming from above our head. Right behind us, I think it was 25 by 50 screen that we put real reprojected 35-millimeter film on it. There was no such thing as MIDI yet in '81. It wasn't worked out yet. Other people like Laurie Anderson and Michael Jackson and David Bowie and all tend to Ron films while they were on stage. It was always soft. We played to a click. There was an audio click that Alan had to count perfectly, or we would have been screwed up for the whole song, and he did. He was a little mechanical timekeeper. He was awesome.

We play to a click so that if I'm singing out of sync and there's robots dancing behind me and they're all in the same movement but one of them's out of sync dancing, I could just point backwards with my hand and go boom like I was shooting a ray gun or something. We'd play a synth on stage or **[unintelligible 00:12:27]**. Because Alan had counted everything perfect, every night, the robot exploded perfectly in time.

We had a song called *Speed Racer*, where a doctor, a girl, and a pirate all come out on stage and sing 15 feet tall. They just wander on stage behind us, and they sing totally in sync with Devo with a song. We had their voices pre-recorded, and they could just do their voice to that. The Pirate, at one point, he's chasing us around the stage, and he starts kicking us. We would just fall over, and it worked really great. It's

suddenly like a big concert hall. It looks pretty good to see us reacting to that, and people loved it. That's what he's referring to.

You get confused with MIDI because my brother, Jim, at that point, he was no longer the drummer. He was so obsessed with electronics and things. He went over, and he started working with Roland synthesizers. There was a group of technicians from all the different music equipment manufacturing companies in those days that all came together and developed MIDI and came up with the protocol and what MIDI was going to be and what sacrifices to make and what things to hold on to. Sometimes that gets talked about and at the same time. That could be why he said MIDI.

Paul: It's pretty awesome. That's so cutting edge, and again, I think over time now. Because of how amped up technology is, we forget in a predominantly analog world. Stuff like that was so groundbreaking, and it's mind-blowing. It's still really cool, of course, but I think people maybe lose some appreciation for the hoops you guys would have to jump through to pull something like that off in 1981.

Mark: Things like MIDI radically changed popular music and what it sounded like because all of a sudden, you could connect all these. It wasn't like you were crawling around on the floor plugging in analog modular synths together to get a sound. It was like all of a sudden, it was very easy. You could use one keyboard, you could be playing five different synths, 10 different synths. 127 actually if you wanted to. It was a very amazing tool to come up for artists, and everybody loved it.

Paul: That's awesome. Now, with Devo as a band, it was a collaborative creative process, whereas in soundtrack composition, it seems-- I'm assuming it's a solo contributor type of role. That may be oversimplifying things. I won't pretend to know everything that goes into scoring a film, but can you talk to the different dynamics, and speak to the pros and cons of each collaborative versus solo composition? The pros and cons of each in terms of creative exploration.

Mark: Yes, I write a lot of music for me, and I never play it for people. I play it for myself and it's something I want to listen to while I'm just hanging out at home and I'll write my own music. With Devo, we were two sets of brothers from the beginning. When my brother left, Bob Gazzale and Alan Meyers came in. There were two Gazzale, two Mothersbaugh still. We were used to collaborating, and we were worried about people in the band. I wrote the most music in the band, and rather than have it where people were when you watch the Beatles, then you see all the bitterness between George Harrison and the other guys because he didn't get [unintelligible 00:16:18].

We decided early on, we're going to split the publishing five ways so that it would give everybody a reason to want to collaborate and to want to give input. Even though songs might say Mark Mothersbaugh wrote the music in words or maybe Jerry wrote the words and I wrote the music or whatever, the reality was everybody was working to help make the song work, and they were rewarded by getting 1/5 of the publishing in which was really good for us.

I always liked that, and that made it actually easier for me to be a composer because on almost every project we work on, the most common thing is a director shows up, and usually, the director is the one who has been pioneering this project. He's been

the person that's been trying to get this done for-- It might have been five years between the time he first read the script or decided, "I want to make this movie," to the time that they'd come to me and say, "Okay, we've got a rough cut to show you," or, "Okay, we've got a script you can read."

There's still collaboration, and I just feel really comfortable with it because I'm used to working that way. For me, it's interesting to listen to people talk because music is so abstract to talk about when you-- If you're trying to give somebody direction like what to write, you're like, "Oh, he's done 20 films already. This is my first, but how do I tell him what to do or what I want?" I'm so used to people just saying, "Make this sad," or, "Make this happier," or, "Make sure that you focus on this character in it," or, "It changes between two people." You right themes and you write music so that you guys can collaborate. For me, I love that. I find it intriguing.

Actually, what I really love more and more all the time is writing music for games, and I'll tell you why. With video games, it's a whole different process because you're writing music for these different levels. Unlike a film where you watch it one time through and you may never see that film again. You may have only seen *Thor Ragnarok* once. Maybe you see it a second time you watch it on TV again and remember it. A lot of times, people only see a film once.

Where a game, especially the first level, a game player is going to hear that music 1,000 times maybe. Who knows how many times they're going to play the game. The first time they hear it, it might take them 20 minutes to get through that first level. You want to make the music and that level really great and something that you would want to listen to for 20 minutes too. Of course, then it also has to be plastic or flexible so that by the 20th time they play the game, maybe they're only there for 30 seconds before they bop on to the next couple of levels, and then they get to the new challenging one.

Then there's something in the way that you listen to music for a video game that is more like writing music than any other medium, I think. What that is, is because *Ratchet & Clank* or whatever, and they're doing something on whatever planet they're on. It starts off very simple, and maybe it's just one instrument, one tone. It's quarter notes or half notes or even slow. Then it's slowly building.

Then maybe what happens is in that, he finds something that he was looking for, and it gives him more power. Then you bring in the woodwind faction, and they're playing a counterpoint to the first piece of music. It's much more like writing. It's like when you write a song, you can't play all the instruments at once, especially orchestra. You can't play 100 instruments at one time. You're putting them on one at a time, and so people that are playing that game, they experience the music more similar to the way a composer writes music than in pop songs for sure where you just hear the finished piece and then you get--

Later on, maybe there's some remixes and it gives you ideas of breakdowns and stuff of the song that give you clues into the song and how it got to where it was and what the intentions are. Then as each of these instruments add up, finally, you get to the end of all the instruments. Maybe the first time you heard them all, it took 30 minutes to hear the whole song, then you start over on another level with one instrument, and it's probably a different instrument. You're doing a whole different--

Like *Ratchet & Clank*, we were going to different planets, so we looked for a totally different feel for different planets. I love writing music for games, to be honest with you.

Paul: Now, our next audience question comes from Vince Milosky of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Vince writes, "Devo was definitely groundbreaking in their approach to music. Since creativity always seems to inspire criticism, how did the band keep focused on their style of music in a culture that was not always accepting of it?"

Mark: I remember at first, our first review in *Rolling Stone* magazine, we got attacked because there's even a song in there that doesn't have a guitar, and they were really pissed off about that. We were like, "Oh, I thought they would love it that we were doing something totally new." After our first setup, it was interesting because, in Europe, it was totally different, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker* and *NME*, *New Music Express*, they came out every week in England, which was really cool, big fat magazines, all about music, but they had the style where it was a build them up, knock them down.

Their first interviews were great. We were on the cover of *Melody Maker* with David Bowie's head in the corner. In that cover, Bowie said, "This is the band of the future." That was a pretty good thing to have the first time you're on the cover of a big music magazine in London. Then a couple of months later, came the knock-them-down part because they need to keep talking because they have to fill up these three big magazines every week.

It was a lot of good stuff, and we charted in at least half a dozen countries in Europe with the first album. *Uncontrollable Urge* was number one in Yugoslavia. *Satisfaction* was in the top 10 in England. Because of that, we got to play on the *Old Grey Whistle Test*. They still didn't know who we were in the US, except at K-Rock on both coasts. College radio played Devo, but we were not on real radio until *Whip It*.

Paul: As we start looking a little bit more at your film composition aspects of your career, was there a learning curve when you started composing for film? What have you learned from that over time as far as film composition and working with orchestras and trying to bring a director's vision to life through music and stuff? What did you have to learn to get there?

Mark: Oh, a lot of things. When I did *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, they were filming it in New York, and they were doing their edits and their mixes over there. I just got a rough take. Then I wrote music for all the parts and sent it back. It wasn't until the end of the first season-- In those days, there was 13 episodes would create a season. I just remember I talked to the picture editor that was putting the whole show together at the end once he had all the sound effects and all the pictures and all the music and all the dialogue.

He goes, "Actually, I always had a question I wanted to ask you, Mark. Why did every cue come to me with leader in between? How come you didn't use time codes so that you could play in total sync with the picture?" I remember saying, "What's time code?"

[laughter]

I hadn't gone to school for music. I think anybody that wants to get into composing, you could save yourself a couple of years of trial and error if you go to music school first.

Paul: Are there any musical artists you would have liked to perform with?

Mark: Oh gosh. Yes. At the time, I thought, "Eww, I don't want to work with them." After one of our shows in L.A., this guy named Burt Bacharach took us over to his mansion late at night. We're in there, and I'm like, "Wow, this looks like *Addams Family* would live here or something. He's like, "Hey, what do you think about us doing a song together? Do you like my--?" I was trying to think, and I go, "I like this song, *Little Red Book*," and he go, "Yes, we should do something together." I wasn't cool enough to do that back then. What we would have done would definitely not have sounded like what Elvis Costello did when he worked with him.

Another time, I think it was right after our first album came out or just before it, it was freezing in Ohio. Richard Branson called up and said, "Hey, how are you guys doing? Do you want to come down to Jamaica?" I'm like, "Jamaica? I've never been there. I've never been anywhere warm, except--" My dad had loaded my family into a station wagon and drove us all around Mexico a few times, and where we would just - Once we got tired of driving, we'd stop, pitch a tent, the family would sleep in a tent on the side of the road in Mexico, and then we'd get back in and drive. He picked all these places to take us to that were awesome.

Bob Gazzale, that morning that he called, I woke up freezing in this living room at somebody's house. We didn't have homes anymore at this point in time. Bob Gazzale was sleeping in what was like a greenhouse off of the living room. The window had blown open during the night, and he was covered with snow hiding under this cover. When Richard called us and said, "Do you want to come down?" Bob and I were ready to go. Jerry, I don't know why he didn't go. Bob Mothersbaugh and Allan Myers were wrapped up with some women that they were-- Bob Mothersbaugh was going to marry this woman eventually. I think they were married already, but they were with their girls.

Bob Gazzale and I said, "We'll come down." We flew down to Kingston, and he took us to this hotel were-- and I just remember Richard saying something. I'll skip to the end. He said, "Well, Johnny Rotten's down here and he's in the next room and he wants to join Devo. If you want to go out onto the beach, we can make an announcement. I've flown in *New Music Express* sounds and *Melody Maker* reporters, that they'll take pictures of you guys shaking hands. We'll talk about this new collaboration."

He had heard that we loved *The Sex Pistols*, which I did, and we saw them there last night that they played in San Francisco. They came over to where Devo was staying, which was just some newspaper, *Search and Destroy*, their newspapers. We just slept on piles of *Search and Destroy* magazines because there weren't really beds in this place. I just remember looking at him. I said, "Well, maybe what Johnny should do is instead of being like an anarchist, he should totally flip over and be a corporation. He should be Johnny Rotten Incorporated." That's the last thing we talked about with that, and there became [crosstalk].

There's other people, I could say. Beefheart, I saw him rehearse a lot because he rehearsed at a house where one of the Gogos lived and some other people. That was near where I lived, so I could walk over there. I watched him rehearse, and I just thought, "Oh, I wouldn't want to be in his band." He told everybody what he wanted them to do, but he had no musical terminology. He would make movements, and he would yell at them.

It was sweet because they all were trying to do what they thought he wanted to do. After he left, they'd be going, "You didn't do a good job at all with that baseline. Yes, [unintelligible 00:29:45]." They'd go, "You don't think so?" They'd go, "I think he liked what I was doing drumming," and it was like, "It was cute." I don't know. There's probably people I'd love to work with.

Paul: Our next audience question comes from David Smith of Leads, United Kingdom. David asks, "Is it clear when a piece of work is finished? Is there a temptation to add another track or rerecord a vocal? Are you typically satisfied when you say something is done?

Mark: Here's my feeling about that. Our first albums, we'd written almost all of the songs while we were still performing live. That was a way of writing music that I think really was good for Devo. I think it was the best way to write music for Devo because we could try them out in clubs, and then we changed things, we modified them. Songs would have a couple of years of gestation period instead of like, "We just wrote an album, we got three weeks to record it. Go." There was a lot of stuff. Even I remember hearing *Whip It*. The first time I heard it in a club, I remember sitting there going, "Why did we use that hi-hat? We should have used the other one that was sitting there. I would've sounded so much better. I remember things like that.

We always were critical of our music, even to the point where when people started covering our stuff, I remember hearing things and going, "That's a good idea. I wish I would have thought of that." [chuckles] Sometimes [unintelligible 00:31:28]. It's like when you play live, though, afterwards, you have the ability to change. If you listen to a live show that we've done in the last 10 years and then listen to albums from 25 years ago or 30 years ago, you'll hear changes. I think the live stuff is almost 100% of the time superior to the records.

Paul: Now, is there a specific film you wished you had been able to compose a soundtrack for like, for instance, a classic from a *Bygone Day*?

Mark: I'm a big TCM fan. What happens for me is I've done so many television shows and so many films out of 175 different TV shows and films mixed together. It's like I go home at night, and the last thing I want to do is I start watching a movie. I go, "Why did he use Hobo, that doesn't make sense, that that's not strong," or I'd say, "Why did that cue keep going on and on? That's irritating." I can't separate it, but when I watched *Black and White*, somehow I go back into my childhood or even back into my 20s where I used to watch movies on black and white TV. I can go into that state you go into when you watch a film, and it's much easier for me.

I watch old movies all the time, and I see all sorts of movies that I think could use a better score. There's some that I just wish I would've been part of. It's like I have movies that are dear to me for the soundtrack. *Clockwork Orange*, for instance, may

have been one of the most impressive soundtracks to me. I thought that was so incredible. I love that. With modern films, there's one. I wanted to score *Idiocracy*, for instance. I thought, for sure, he would go, "Oh, Devo should be scoring *Idiocracy*, and he didn't."

I wanted to score *Back to the Future* because Devo played this show at the palace in Hollywood. After the show, Steven Spielberg was there and he came up with Robert Zemeckis and I said, "Hey, Mark, we want to talk to you. We thought you guys are great. I want to talk to you about this movie we're doing." I'd already been scoring things. I was so excited and he sent me the script and I thought, "Oh, this is great. This is perfect. I would love to score this film."

I got into his office, and they said, "Okay, I'll tell you what we want. We want you to be the character. There's a professor in this film, and we want you to be the professor in our movie." I go, "No, you mean, you want me to act?" He goes, "Yes." I go, "Oh, I don't know how to act." He goes, "No, we watched all those films that you were showing before you went on stage, and we watched you on stage. You're such a great performer, actor." I go, "Oh, I make that stuff up. That's not somebody else's stuff. Everything I do, I make up myself." I just remember they just looked at me like I was crazy. I left and I just remember going, "Oh man, I thought they were going to ask me to score their film." I remember being so disappointed.

Paul: You missed your chance to be Doc Brown?

Mark: Yes.

Paul: [laughs] Now, is there a composition you're most proud of, or is there one that's most indicative of the Mothersbaugh sound?

Mark: No, because you change with life and life brings all these different things to you. I understand that a lot of artists, they do have a brand that's very recognizable as what they do. Especially, when I got into music bands, they found a sound, and they stuck with it. Warner Brothers fought with us. They wanted us to stick with the sound. When *Whip It* happened, they were all over us saying, "Hey, do anything you want on your next record. Just do another *Whip It*." I got to say, we didn't do that to be a pop song, so I don't really how to accomplish that.

For me, it's like it would be a different song for different times. When I was working with Wes Anderson on this one film, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, there was a scene in it where Angelica Houston and--

Paul: Jean Hackman?

Mark: Jean Hackman. Thanks. Yes, *The Royal Tenenbaums*. They're walking through Central Park, and it's long-- Everything's long done between them. She's got a new boyfriend, Danny Glover. She goes for this walk. For the first time since she's known him, he's being super complimentary, he's being really nice, and he's noticing things. He's the way she wished he would've been 20 years earlier. It's too late for it, but he doesn't recognize it. The music I wrote for that was up, and it was optimistic.

Wes used to take music that I wrote. I'd write sketches at just reading the scripts. He'd wear headphones, and he'd listen to the musics for timing out the shots that he was shooting. He would listen to the music for tempos and things like that and energy, intensity. When he worked on *Life Aquatic*, there's a scene where Bill Murray pops his head up into the screen. He says, "Let me tell you about my boat." Bill Murray is like a loser version of Jacques Cousteau. His ship, they haven't made any good movies. [chuckles] It's funny, though.

He did keep the kitchen in tip-top shape. The kitchen has all modern appliances, but the soundman and the composer, and the cameraman, they're on outmoded equipment. He is going to the boat, and he's talking about it in a really positive way. Wes says, "I want it to be something like when Angelica and Jean were in Central Park. That cue *Scraping and Fighting*." Wes renamed every cue I ever wrote. No matter how good the names were, he renamed every cue. That was one of his things because that was his movie. That was so great.

He was playing *Scraping and Fighting* while he was watching, while he was filming. Let me tell you about my boat, and so he said he wants something like that. I wrote him something. Then he went, "Yes, I like that, but it's not quite as good as *Scraping and Fighting*." Then I wrote him something else. [**unintelligible 00:38:50**] again. At that time in my life, I was making artwork I call *Beautiful Mutants*. I was taking photographs. I started with my family and then people I knew and then it broadened out. I was taking photos. I was flipping them over so that you would have a perfectly symmetrical head.

I found out that every human, even you, there's a side of your head that when you make it symmetrical, you might look younger, cuter like a really nice guy, happy, angelic. Any of those kind of things might fit you. The other side is going to be darker, brooding, maybe demonic, maybe monstrous. It's interesting that I became really fascinated with that. I was living at home. I was making this family of characters and putting them all over these rooms. I was splitting things like that and doing symmetry.

I came back from writing music for Wes and him saying, "Try it again." I was thinking, "What would I do? He likes *Scraping and Fighting*." I took the sheet music for *Scraping and Fighting*, and I held it up to a mirror to reverse it. I started playing it, and I said, "Wait a minute." I took that music for *Scraping and Fighting* and I played it backwards and used the instruments. Instead of using of the instruments from *Scraping and Fighting* movie from *The Royal Tenenbaums*, I used the instruments I was using for *Life Aquatic*, and I rebuilt that so that it played forward. I played it for him the next day, and he went, "That's it, Mark. That's perfect." I was like, "Do I tell him he already owns that music, or do I just wait until after we record it?" Right now, he loves it, so I don't want to do anything that [**unintelligible 00:40:44**].

Paul: That is so genius.

Mark: It's just a wild thing that somehow worked out.

Paul: That's amazing. I've got another audience question. This is from Michael Basil right in California. He asks, "How has the progress of technology influenced how you've worked, and what impacts have you seen on your own compositions in

career?" He goes on to give an example, "For example, as we've gone from a small number of tracks on a single tape reel in a fairly small physical studio space to easily transferring 128 track studio quality recordings internationally with very little waiting. How has that inspired, and how has it changed your performances?"

Mark: It's really changed everything in amazing ways both good and bad, but it makes me, at the end of the day, go, "This may be the best time ever for somebody to say, "I want to be a composer," or, "I want to write music." It's never been easier. It's never been more democratic. It used to be. You had to write a song, somehow get a record company A&R person to hear it, and then they have to say, "All right, we pick you to do an album." That's how it used to be.

Now, a kid can have an idea or just be playing around and then create something. You don't even have to worry about a record company. You can just put it right on the internet, and you can have 100,000 viewers in no time for no money. Technology just has good and bad things. When Devo started, we had a four-track Teac amateur tape recorder, and we got used to recording one instrument on each of the four tracks or stereo mix for the drums and maybe putting down a bass and a guitar. Then I'd mix those four down to two again. Then I'd have two open channels, and I'd put probably vocals and a lead instrument on it. Then mix that down.

It was obviously more difficult, but that's what the Bills did when they started off. What I found out later is it forced you to make sure you recorded exactly what you wanted the first time. Once we started getting into [**unintelligible 00:43:07**] track, and then once pro tools and computers got involved, then it got into this thing where it's like, "That bass doesn't sound exactly right." "Well, put another one on top of it." "Then it's not there." "Try one that's a little more staccato." Then you'd have this mush of bass sounds that none of them were the perfect bass sound. Same thing with synth sounds. You'd go, "Oh, that's not exactly--" "Just double it, triple it, and guitars, and everything."

You had to learn to be careful. There was a long period of time that we overproduced stuff, I think. There was a couple albums where you really hear it overproduced. It was a learning curve. Now, it's like I know better. It's like I resist the temptation to put a 80-piece orchestra on something if I know that I can do it with a string quartet better.

Paul: I got two more questions for you. The first one is, do you ever look back on your career and body of work and marvel at how things have played out?

Mark: I'm pretty lucky. I have to say that because when I started off in music, I never thought about being a film composer or a TV composer. I thought, "No, I'm just--" I was an artist, and I wasn't thinking about it in terms of money or in terms of work. I was used to painting apartments to pay for my apartment. Then I would have the evening that I could go to the Teac 4-track and record.

Yes, I do marvel. I think I'm really lucky because I just had the right set of elements that made me fit in at the right time. I came along at a time when the entertainment industry was shifting over from using all live players to-- They were interested in electronics. I knew him well, and I'd already had a little bit of experience because I wrote incidental music for Devo concerts like music to play before or during the

show, even in our first video, a Chuck Statler film, I took and scored the end of it. I took a Beatle song and then ran it through a ring modulator and made the-- but it was Muzak, to begin with. It was this weird sci-fi Muzak by time I got done.

I think we've done an album by then. Dean Stockwell asked me to score an off-Broadway [**unintelligible 00:45:44**] play that was a one-man play that Russ Tamblyn acted in. I scored that one-man play, and then Dean, his next project was directing a film for Neil Young called *Human Highway*. He gave Neil Young my score to play, and Neil listened to it. They used that to be about half of the underscore for *Human Highway*, besides Devo performing in the-- I had a little bit of experience then with scoring by the time I did *Pee-wee*.

I was learning on the job definitely, constantly. You say *Rugrats*. *Rugrats*, to me, I think of it in a really-- I have really fun memories.

It was this guy, Gabor Csupo. He was a Hungarian who was smuggled through in the trunk of a car across the iron curtain. Then he came all the way over to Hollywood to make films. He paired up with Arlene Klasky, and they made this great combination together where he made the *Rugrats* characters look like tumors and weird limbs that were grotesque but cute at the same time. She put the heart into the show. She worked on the story and made sure the story was heartfelt. They were very complimentary in that way.

He called me up. He collected art music. He collected esoteric music, and he had found an album I'd done in Japan. I used to go to Japan in the early mid-'80s, and I would write music or produce art bands over there like plastics [**unintelligible 00:47:31**]. People like that. He heard this album I'd done with a label called Tokyo Radical Artists. It was called *Music For Insomniacs*. I put a gold metallic cassette and then a deck of cards that had photos on each card that you could play cards until you fell asleep was the idea.

He said, "Hey, can I use one of the theme songs for our show, *Rugrats*?" I said, "I've scored TV before. Can I see what you're doing?" I said, "Let me write you a new song. I wrote the theme song for *Rugrats* and then that's how it started and then scored the show. What was really great about that show for me is was Nickelodeon had never done a feature yet, so they didn't know what paramount, who was the company that was going to put out the movie. They didn't know what they knew. What paramount knew was that don't hire a guy who's never scored an animation feature film with a full orchestra before. That's dangerous. They were artists, and they went, "No, he wrote all the music for our show. He's going to score our show." It freaked out people of paramount.

Somehow I had some people including Bruce Feiler, who I think at one time, he played with Zappa, but he was now like really into the world of scoring. He was like one of the foremost brass players. He offered to help me orchestrate my music. When I wrote pieces out, he go, "Okay, Mark. Now see that lead line you have there, it's a flute, but right there at the C flat, it's going to turn into a piccolo." When I write the orchestration, the piccolo will be up here, the flute would be here, it'll work perfect."

I had people that were orchestrators on that film that really helped me out. By the time I went to record it in London, it's like I'd learned a lot. [chuckles] *Rugrats*, they helped me break through the *Catch-22*, where before that, I would only get to do films where it had a small band like West Anderson size bands, like 12 people. Maybe 16 people playing. *Rugrats* broke through that door for me.

Paul: I often wonder like how do you as a symphonic composer, how do you determine what instruments play what part of-- When somebody sits down and writes something out on a piano, and then it suddenly becomes 100 piece orchestra. Who gets what part of that musical pie? I'm sure trying learn that but it's great that you had Bruce there to mentor you and help you see, "Oh yes. Okay, flute, piccolo, that's where I make that split."

Mark: I could read music, but I'd never written it out longhand before. In a band, you write down chords on a piece of paper, and then you show them to the band. They all know what chords to play, and then you start talking about parts. You don't really pass out sheet music per se.

[crosstalk]

Mark: Then by the time I got into scoring, computers were there to save my life, so I could write into a software. I used something called Vision at the time. That doesn't exist anymore, before Logic. Then it gave you a way to use a keyboard and go right into sheet music. You're playing the notes on the sheet music, so that's how I was allowed to get into that world because I didn't study it in school. It worked out.

Paul: My last question for you is, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Mark: In my case, I would say, pay more attention to the business because I was totally an artist, and I made mistakes that the band became irritated. Because of me, we were on both Virgin Records in Europe and Warner Brothers Records in the US. You want know why that sounded great to me? Besides, Richard Branson was the same age as us. I thought that was amazing because he's signed the Sex Pistols, and he's put out Tubular Bells. What was so great about it is I designed one album cover for the US and a totally different one for England. That's so awesome. I get to design two album covers, and if we put out two singles, that means four single sleeves instead of just--

That was something that always fascinated me when I was a kid. If you got a Beatles album in the US that was different than the Beatles album in England and you'd be like, "Huh, why did they do that?" You'd almost want to just buy them. If you had the money, you'd buy them both so that you could look at all of it to get all the clues and information to what was going on. I stupidly got our band into a two-label deal, and it cost us a lot of money at the end of the day.

Paul: When you're young.

Mark: The only other thing I would say is something I did adhere to it, but I would give it to other people is don't doubt your vision. There's so many people who want to destroy you that you don't even know it. They seem like they're your friends, and they're not. There's so many reasons why you shouldn't be able to recognize your

vision or have it come out. You got to just be strong, and that's hard for a lot of people. I understand now.

Paul: Mark, thank you so much for this time. What a treasure, and I really appreciate it. It's just fascinating. Like you said, you've had just a remarkable career. It's been a real treat to sit down and hear you share these insights and also some thoughts on what other innovators and creators can take to heart and what they can learn from. Thank you so much for your time today.

Mark: Oh, my pleasure. If you want to do this again tomorrow, I'll probably have totally different answers for you.

Paul: Oh, excellent, we'll do part two in the sequel.

[laughter]

Mark: You just ask the same question.

[music]

[00:54:12] [END OF AUDIO]