

# Sound and Vision

Music Editor Oisin Lunny explores the collaborative art of audio-visual R&B project RHYE

It's no coincidence that this article takes its name from a seminal David Bowie tune, one of his many halcyon collaborations with guru of ambient sound Brian Eno. Both artists redefined what it meant to make music in a visual era. Their respective art school backgrounds infused their vast creative output, from Bowie's choice of sleeve design, stage costumes and videos through to Eno's artful installations and groundbreaking collaborations.

But *son et lumière* have always gone together, hand in glove. In his forthcoming book *Visual Music Masters*, Adriano Abbado reflects that in Western culture, the first associations between music and the visual arts arguably date back to the sixth century BC and "Pythagoras' studies of proportion, which were actually part of a larger body of research on the numerological unity observed in Nature and in various cultural expressions."

Fast forward to the twentieth century and think of the cultural impact of Andy Warhol's pop group, the Velvet Underground, or the surreal and auteuristic work of Björk; think of artists who use music and visuals to create distinct and immersive worlds, such as Die Antwoord, Arca, Fever Ray and Massive Attack. For the likes of Danish electronic artist

Soho Rezanejad and post-rock duo Nordic Giants, video and music are indivisible, the creative expression only complete when experienced together. And for others, like LA-based multimedia artist and musician Johnny Dar, sound and visuals are elements of creative empires comprised of paintings, fashion design, video art and, of course, music.

But what does an audio-visual collaboration look like in 2018? How do modern musicians create new art across a diversity of media, and how can they embrace new audio-visual production technology while nurturing their craft?

LA-based RHYE are an intriguing example of a musical project taking a broad approach to audio production, combining orchestral string arrangements, pizzicato strings and a concert grand piano with subtle 80s funk guitar and synths, rolling beats, and modern percussive touches. Their latest album, *Blood*, is gently seductive and gradually spellbinding, a timeless collection of late night music for lovers and dreamers. Lead singer and co-founder Mike Milosh adds his distinctive smooth vocals to the lush audio proceedings, occasionally echoing George Michael or Prince in full-on "bedroom mode".

Milosh also masterminds much of RHYE's distinctive visual identity. Many of the release visuals are intimate black and white nude portraits he has taken of his partner Geneviève Meadow Jenkins, who reciprocates in kind with black and white portraits of Milosh.

During a recent visit to London, we caught up with Milosh to talk collaboration, co-creation, embracing new tech and the elusive overlap of audio production and visual design.

**PHOENIX:** Tell us about the role of visuals in your work.

**RHYE:** The visual work is a really important representation of the music, it allows me to create a world that presents the project both visually and sonically. We live in a time now where people use all their senses to digest a body of work and it's really important that all aspects of the project represent the message clearly. The visual work is an extension of the meaning of the song that comes from the same place in me that creates the music.

**P:** Who or what inspires your sound and vision?

R: My personal life inspired me, that's my biggest inspiration. My life with Geneviève who I love, who also graces the album cover, our experiences and the different things that we go through. I get inspiration from forests, nature, hiking, trees, mountains, Switzerland. Anywhere that's not a city.

**P:** Are your visual productions solo or collaborations?

R: On this particular album, *Blood*, I'm shooting and Geneviève is posing. With the videos, I directed the first one, but the second that's about to come out, Geneviève wrote it but we co-directed it together. I don't know what's going to happen for the next, but it's really important we collaborate on these videos because it's a lot of fun and doesn't feel like work.

**P:** What comes first for you, the music or visuals? Or do they evolve in tandem?

R: The music comes first because that's the base of the project and then the music lends itself naturally to the visuals. The visuals make sense because I know the sonic environment and so it's easy for the visuals to follow that.

**P:** What materials do you use to express your vision?

R: Sonically, a lot of analogue gear, I love using lots of different pre-amps, compressors and synthesisers, as well as different pianos and drums – well, one particular drum set, actually. Visually, I'm really interested in photography itself. I shoot the videos with a red camera, shoot the photography with a 5D but also different analogue cameras.

**P:** Do you prefer digital or analogue material in your visual productions?

R: In visual, it's a hybrid, the video work is definitely digital; I absolutely love the red camera. I think its dynamic range is unparalleled and would just be something I couldn't afford to do with analogue by itself. Photography, I go back and forth. However, I'm a huge fan of M42 mount lenses, both in photography and in visual.

**P:** Who would you like to collaborate with in the future?

R: Ólafur Arnalds, and Denis Villeneuve, the director who did *Blade Runner*. I've already collaborated with a lot of people musically, I'm really into that. Other than Ólafur Arnalds, probably someone like Lana Del Rey.

**P:** How can you translate your visual identity to the live stage?

R: What I do is, I don't. I allow the music to be the message and I haven't, to this point, included a lot of the visual work in the live performance because I want the music to stand



Album artwork by Mike Milosh





Photo by Geneviève Meadow Jenkins

on its own. I'm going to slowly integrate visual elements into the live set in a natural way.

**P: Do you see an overlap between the worlds of fine art and fashion?**

R: Yes, definitely. More when it comes to haute couture. But I think the artistry in fashion is incredible and there's definitely a world that they both intercept in.

**P: Is it important for your visual art to stand alone or is it an integral part of your music?**

R: I would love it if they could stand alone, but they also feel of the same universe.

**P: If budget were no object, what would your next project look like?**

R: It would be a feature film for sure, one that I score too. Not a musical, but the music would be very important to the film.

**P: What media celebrates the kind of art you respect?**

R: *Artform*, *W* Magazine ironically, and I love *Sound on Sound* – it's a total geek out but I think it's important to have an understanding of the geeky aspects of production. I actually just like looking at people's Instagrams and photos, I check out fashion photographer Chris Cole's work a lot, I love the way he shoots. Helmut Newton, I love his photography.

**P: Is new technology influencing your work?**

R: I think that I'm always embracing technology. I was shooting documentaries with PD150s, XL1S's when everyone was freaking out about this digital revolution. Now I'm shooting with a Red 5k Dragon that allows me to do a lot more than I ever could with digital photography, but I just love combining it with old lenses to get a less sterile vibe. In terms of music, I love the same thing, like

incorporating old microphones such as Neumann U67 and old U41 Telefunken and old pre-amps and old compressors like CL1Bs and API2500s or DBX160s, however, I also love the latest versions of software from Logic to Isotope. I'm not dogmatic about one style, I love knowing how to use everything and making informed decisions on what techniques I'm employing.

**P: Are there times when tech is disruptive to your work?**

R: More beneficial, but I'm inherently interested in technology. I have scout sessions with my friends where we all talk about [tech]. But I like to understand to the point where I'm able to then close down, stop being a tech geek, and let my emotions dictate what I do creatively.

**P: What do you think of VR and its place in music?**

R: I don't know yet what to do with it. I have distinct ideas of how I could implement it itself, it's just a matter of partnering with the right people who have the right technical skills. It's a very intriguing way of approaching the visual. What I'm really interested in is how to capture a live performance with VR, as opposed to making something hyper-technical, hyper-surreal or graphic-oriented, I would be interested in making something hyper-real.

**P: Are we at risk of losing traditional artistic craftsmanship as a consequence of new technology?**

R: Yeah, I think we're always at risk of losing old ways of doing things, and there's always a small number of people who really embrace learning about methods that are a lot older. I actually studied electric acoustics in school, which meant I was splicing tape together to get sounds effects and edits – and that was pre-computers. But once I found computers, I never really went back to that methodology. Hopefully what happens is people understand why technologies emulate methodologies of the past while embracing the future.

*Blood* is out now.