

Music Interview

The Sonic Worlds of Man, Memory, and Nature Intermix for a New Documentary Film

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Producer/Director JENNIFER GALVIN, Film Composer GIL TALMI, and Sound Designer GISELA FULLA-SILVESTRE discuss their generative collaboration in bringing a new documentary, *THE MEMORY OF FISH*, to life.



TheMemoryOfFish.com | Photo: reelblue, LLC.

THE MEMORY OF FISH, narrated by LILI TAYLOR, is a documentary portrait of one man and his fight to free a river. It premieres at the Seattle International Film Festival in May 2016. This feature documentary, six years in the making, follows the life story of mill worker-turned-conservationist Dick Goin, who dedicated his life to restoring Washington State's Elwha River by battling for the biggest dam removal project in U.S. history. His goal: bring the salmon home.

Galvin, Talmi, and Fulla-Silvestre sat down to talk about their process of merging film, music, and sound for THE MEMORY OF FISH at Talmi's music studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

PART 1: MEETING OF THE MINDS

GIL TALMI: I moved my studio into the Brooklyn Navy Yard almost a decade ago. The space overlooks Manhattan and the East River. The East River is powerful and dirty and Kramer once had a swim in it, which I would personally never do, although the thought usually crosses my mind around mid-August when NY becomes a sweltering schwitz fest.

JENNIFER GALVIN: After working with editor Erin Barnett for a year, who is one of the most talented editors I've worked with, getting to the music and sound phase of post-production was very exciting. Gil is a musical mad scientist, and I figured he must really like fish. I absolutely love being in a music studio and I was hopeful the camaraderie would be strong, which it was.

TALMI: For the sound design, Gisela immediately jumped to mind as the natural candidate for the gig. An inspiring and innovative composer and recording artist, I knew she would understand the delicate musicality that the film required both on the music and sound design end. This is not a film where the two need to be in competition with each other, as in so many others films. For this film, all elements needed to share a symbiotic space, as in nature itself.

GISELA FULLA-SILVESTRE: When Gil first approached me to work on this film, I was very excited to work with him. He's a rare person, talented beyond limits, and generous and light hearted at the same time. And, to work on a story that takes us underwater was even more exciting. When I first talked to Jen, it was very clear how both the underwater world and Dick's inner psychological reality were so connected, which, to me, made the film very special. So we decided to play a lot with that through sound, creating very sensorial universes. I wanted people to feel the movement of the salmon, their habitat, and create subjective soundscapes to understand Dick's process, his fight, his ideals, his struggle, his memory.

PART 2: THE MUSIC

GALVIN: I remember that Bowie had just died. After our first spotting session, I offered Gil and Gisela a North Star word for the project: Create. That word perked up all of our ears. It felt like a rare charge and opened an interesting conversation: 'Nobody ever says that anymore: Create. When do people truly ask us on a production job to just go for it, and give the license to do so openly and freely? Yeah, let's do THAT.' Soon after, Gil and I also made a pact not to provide each other with any inspirational music sources for what this part fable, part biography, part nature film should sound like. Create!

TALMI: When we all started working together, there was something very inspiring about sitting right next to this vast city river, the East River, while scoring a film about the Elwha River. Both rivers are very different in nature, but it's as if the water connected us directly to the source. Our creative process had a wonderful flow to it, building on each other's ideas in a fun and sinuous dance. Jen is one of those courageous directors who really knows how to bring out the very best in everyone. She gently extracts collaborative ideas rather than impose predisposed ideals.

I was excited that the Mother-32 came out just in time to be used as the main instrument in the score. I fell in love with it so completely that I had to buy another one (and am seriously contemplating a third). The Mother scoring Mother Nature... how appropriate is that? I love the richness and roundness of the tones it can produce. I was able to create these resonant atmospheres that don't sound like they are coming from electronic circuits at all, but rather as if recorded down below on a dark and distant riverbed, or deep within the salmon roe, just as life begins to unfold.

GALVIN: I affectionately named the two Mothers 'The Magic Clam'; when the two are stacked, they look like a clam. Nature, man, and memory were the main compositional themes. Often times Gil constructed transformative solutions by playing tracks backwards and letting instruments reverberate. I just want to live in those lush, long reverbs.

TALMI: For the juxtaposition of man versus nature, I decided to buy a Mandolin and record it alongside the textures of the analog synths. There is something haunting about the two sonic worlds flowing in and out of each other, sometimes clashing and colliding, and then coming back together again.

PART 3: THE SOUND

GALVIN: Gisela's process was about water from the start, and she took it literally. She jumped into lakes and streams with condom-covered mics. She made recordings that would enhance the sensations of the Elwha River world and help the audience get inside Dick's mind. Like an alchemist, she transformed basic natural elements into story gold. Wind blowing, fishing lines whirring, seagulls calling, clocks ticking, water rushing, rain falling, leaves blowing – these were the types of sounds used to bend time and re-imagine the river.

FULLA-SILVESTRE: Yeah, I wanted the water to be all around the audience. I even recorded underwater movement in my tub to get the big salmon tail movements and deep bubble sounds to help you feel like you're there with them. It was really important to keep the sound raw during the whole film. I didn't want it to sound super stylized. I had to keep the intimacy because this is a story about the life of someone who lived to fight for a noble cause, but he did it without huge fireworks and big words, and mostly through small actions and persistence in his everyday life.

TALMI: I agree. Both sound and music really had to be very gentle in order to not overshadow or drown out the film's main character. Except for the opening scene, which is more cinematic, most of the music caters much more to the inner world than the outer, whether it's Dick or the salmon. It's a kind of gentle meditation on being.

GALVIN: It's hard to get people to really feel a river. I think the three of us worked hard to help people understand how and why rivers and fish matter through sound and music, just as much as the film does that through visuals. What does man versus nature sound like? What does memory sound like? And what does memory degradation sound like?

FULLA-SILVESTRE: I feel very grateful to have been able to work with Jen and Gil on a film that lights a fire in people and maybe helps them connect to their own memories of being near water. It's always a treat to be part of something that you actually believe in. And, to be honest, the three of us had a lot of fun in the process, learned how to meditate, ate way too much dark chocolate, and geeked the ungeekable at Gil's synth temple.

TALMI: The sound design is so beautifully done that I decided to include some of it on the soundtrack. Trying to determine where music ends and sound begins is like trying to decide whether a river's mouth is its beginning or its end.

MORE ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Jennifer Galvin is producer-director at reelblue, LLC – an independent film production and media company based in New York. More at www.reelblue.net

Gil Talmi is a film composer with a passion for socially conscious films (and modular synths). More at www.giltalmi.com

Gisela Fulla-Silvestre is a sound designer and music composer, and now also the proud owner of a Mother-32. More at IMDb www.imdb.com/name/nm4965098/

THE MEMORY OF FISH soundtrack will be released on iTunes and Amazon
end of May 2016.