

# Vying for Attention

Composing music for films and TV can involve much more work than the actual music making alone, says Dobs Vye...

Feature by Will Simpson

**"I'm as much of a detective as I am a musician," Dobs Vye laughs. By this he doesn't mean he taps strangers' phones or spends his evenings dusting suspects' fingerprints. No, it's just that for the BAFTA-winning composer, who has created the music for over 100 TV series, work consists not just of time spent in the studio, but hours of tracking down producers, figuring out when programmes are going to be made, and gleaning information about when and how their music is likely to be commissioned. It's a plate-spinning life. Right after this interview he has to get back to work on a pitch for a new BBC Entertainment show.**

Unsurprisingly, working in this field wasn't his original intention when he began his career as a musician. Dobs started out playing piano and guitar, plus cello in an orchestra before music went by the wayside at college when he discovered the joys of rowing. "In terms of the virtuoso use of instrument skills, I've definitely let them wane," he admits. "The thing I play most often now is the mouse."

After college he played in a variety of bands before drifting into management – he represented Dido for a while, as well as top name DJs like Sasha and John Digweed. "Dance music taught my ears a lot. The fine details, the fine changes – it was like a completely different language. And without that I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing, because I became intrigued with the building blocks of production and how little details can be ear candy. That fascinates me more now than a chord progression."

At the same time he was becoming jaded with the industry. "I think I got fed up with people and the flakiness, with things not coming through and jobs not coming good. So my mindset after quite a while of unemployment was: 'if I won the lottery tomorrow what would I do?' And the answer was that I'd build a studio in my garden and just make music."

**"I asked lots of people if they knew anyone who worked in TV."**

So Dobs went to The Prince's Trust, secured a loan, and set himself up as Adage Music Limited, with the notion of creating music for advertising. It was tough at first. The Prince's Trust asked him to write a cashflow forecast for two years in advance. "I pestered and asked lots of people if they knew anyone who needed music. I volunteered to replace library music for architecture videos, all kinds of weird stuff."

He chanced across a Radio One producer who had just switched to BBC2's late 90s music show, *The O Zone*. "I started by writing her a congratulations card," Dobs recalls. "Then I offered some fresh music for the show which I thought she might like. I think they wanted Basement Jaxx, and obviously she couldn't afford them, so she came back to me."

"After that I pestered everybody if they knew anyone who worked in TV. A friend worked at Sky who then put me in touch with the guy in charge of *Sky News*. I went to see him and found out they were rebranding soon. So I pitched. And I won the gig. That was a huge development, as that was a big job to win. Looking back, it was definitely a breakthrough."

#### Pitch perfect

The process of actually getting the work varies. Quite often, as with so many freelance jobs, it's down to word of mouth. "The most delightful way of working is for somebody to call me up and say, 'We want you to do this'. That does happen and it has happened thankfully quite a lot this year. Often though it's a pitch situation."

A good relationship with the series producer is key. "Some are good at talking about music, some are not. It's my job to actually find out what they want. Sometimes they are very organised and have a brief and send me music. I'll be asking questions about tone, instrumentation, and what is happening visually on the programme."

Things get difficult when a producer provides only vague directions. Or worse, starts changing their mind about what they want. "Some people say things on a whim which can then take me days to create. Then when I come back to them they go 'ah no actually I didn't mean that'. There was one time with this producer – with whom I'd had some hit →

## Dobs' CV

In his long composing career, Dobs has created music for, among others:

**BBC:** *Blue Peter, Last Choir Standing, Rogue Traders, Rank The Prank, House Swap, Eurovision: Making Your Mind Up, Watchdog, Animal Antics, The Travel Show, Jackanory*  
**ITV:** *Big Star's Little Star, Let Me Entertain You, Beat The Star, Life On Marbs, Fake Reaction*  
**Sky:** *Sky News, Antiques House*  
**Channel 4:** *The Games, Secret Eaters, Forty*  
**Channel 5:** *Violets Are Blue, Half Built House, Inside Out*  
**Other clients:** Discovery, Nickelodeon, Endemol, UK Play, Radio 2, Talkback, 12 Yard, Zodiac Media, Mentorn, STV, Lion Television, Freemantle

Elsewhere, Dobs' self-titled *Public Symphony* album was released first in 2006, and then again as *Inspire* in 2010.

While at 7PM Management, he co-managed artists like Sasha, John Digweed, BT, Dido, Blue Amazon and Shiva.

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Like any freelancer, Dobs Vye suggests that putting the footwork in pays great rewards.

shows – he’d given me guidance that I’d then delivered on, which he then later disagreed with and the job got taken away from me. That sort of thing can be very demoralising.”

#### Digging deep

It can be a lucrative job, depending on how much work you do and how successful those shows are. Fees vary, but of more value long term are royalties. “That is the core part of my business. I consider myself a miner at the PRS coalface.” But while commercial musicians have had to adapt to the way the Internet has turned the industry upside down, Dobs has had to go through a similarly uncomfortable period of adjustment to changes in the TV landscape.

“When PRS changed the rates between prime and non-primetime, that was hugely wounding to my income, because suddenly my shows that were on during the daytime were being paid a third or even half less. Then even worse: the BBC decided to take all the kids shows – ‘cos a lot of my shows were kids’ shows – off their flagship channels. BBC1 primetime is edging towards £100 a minute and CBBC is £4 a minute, so my income took a massive hit. But then I just had to work on getting more primetime terrestrial shows, which I’ve actually managed to do.”

These days Dobs rarely meets his clients in person. “It’s very faceless. Sometimes I feel that I might have more loyalty if I did have more meetings. But the fact is I’ve been able to do transatlantic work. Now you can work anywhere in the world, for anybody, across time zones. You can do things quite remotely, which works for me because I’ve got a studio out here in the woods in High Wycombe.”

#### Music business

He advises those who are curious about pursuing a similar route to develop a business head about them: “It’s not just an artistic pursuit, it’s a business, and for you to remain in business you have to be good at business. That’s why I’d recommend writing a business plan and get experts in to advise you.”

“The other is to do everything and anything to hone your production skills. And that means making music for everybody – in other words not restricting yourself to one niche genre or style. I’m still trying to get better. My ears are getting better and my mixing is getting better. That’s the great thing about what I do. You’ve never arrived or ever finished learning. There are always new toys to play with and different styles of music to get into and try to create.”

Dobs has been an MU member since the late 90s, and in all that time hasn’t had to use the Union’s services, beyond insurance. “I’ve been

lucky when it comes to payments. Usually my clients tend to be big enough companies to pay. People are reasonably good at that, even if you have to chase them sometimes. But even though I’ve never had to fall back on them, the Union is important. It’s a lobby group that is necessary in a digital world. I can’t speak for jobbing instrument players because that isn’t really my sphere, but in terms of there being a voice for musicians to government, I’d say it’s crucial.”

He has no regrets about the route not travelled as a commercial musician. Like any freelancer, the life of a TV composer is precarious, but it can be immensely rewarding – although any glowing moments of satisfaction when he kicks off his shoes and switches on the TV to hear something he was working on six months ago are a rarity in the Vye household. “I don’t indulge myself like that very much!” he laughs. “Never have. I’m just thrilled when I get the work in. Occasionally when you win a pitch you think: ‘Ah I got that in front of the usual suspects’. It’s probably like any sport in that respect – you get your losses and victories. But for me, the fact that I’m still doing it, still working, is the main thing.” Time then, to get back to the studio, to that pitch, and the ongoing detective work. 