

Jeff Around Town – January 21st, 2025

Jeff: Time now for Jeff Around Town joining me, Omaha Treasure, Academy Award-winning filmmaker, Alexander Payne. Alexander, thanks so much for being here.

Alexander: I think you're an Omaha Treasure, Jeffrey Koterba, and have been for a long time, and it's cool that you're doing this show.

Jeff: Well, you're so very, very kind. So, you have this special program coming up this weekend with the Omaha Symphony at the Holland, and it's all about the power of music in film. And I realize that you're not the one composing the music for your films, but I'm wondering, when you're either writing or directing a scene, do you ever have a sense of what the music might be like in that scene, in that moment?

Alexander: No, rarely. I mean, you can do it, and some directors have had pieces of music composed beforehand, so they can play those pieces of music on the set, and then the rhythm of the actors matches the rhythm of the music. That has been done, but I personally have not done that yet.

Jeff: Do you ever write to music that's unrelated to what might be in a film? I mean, just something in the background?

Alexander: Every once in a while. I mean, normally, I find music on when I'm writing a script a little bit distracting, but there are exceptions. I know when I was writing *About Schmidt* many, many years ago, I would put on a certain, forgive my pronunciation, “Gnossienne” by Erik Satie that would always kind of anchor me in the mood I wanted, kind of a real melancholy, and that same piece of music appears in the film.

Jeff: Oh, that's interesting. There's something about Erik Satie's music. In Chopin, there was a study recently about Chopin's music in particular that said that it really helped with the creative process, but for me, when I'm creating, I mostly like quiet time or just something kind of light in the background.

Alexander: Agreed, agreed.

Jeff: So, location. So, we'll pivot away from the music a bit. I don't want to give too much away on your program. How important is the location in your films? I mean, obviously that is important, but I'm thinking in particular about some of the films you've done in Omaha and especially places like 50th and Underwood or the Woodman Tower or La Casa. You grew up here. You're from here. Is it nostalgia for you or is there something more powerful about those particular locations?

Alexander: Yeah, before I answer that question, let me just say one word for your listeners about what we're going to be doing at the Symphony Show this coming weekend, which is I just kind of want to, I'll discuss with the audience how film has never existed without music. They're not two separate things. They're really two elements, two different pieces of art which come together and have a miraculously synergistic relationship. And I'll be spotlighting three composers, three masters who, had they lived a couple hundred years ago, we would still be playing their music. Bernard Herrmann, an American, and then two Italians, Ennio Morricone and Nino Rota. And so it's, I'm really excited, if nothing else, just to like, as

an excuse to hear some of my favorite pieces of music performed live. So, I'm really excited about it.

Now about a sense of place, you know, there's nostalgia. It's interesting you mentioned that because there is, I think when you shoot in a place you're from, it's... there's a paradox. You both know the place really well. I mean, I can scout locations, Omaha locations in my mind, you know, basically, and... or I'll write many locations into the script. So I know it so well, but then at the same time, it's like you're still trying to capture something elusive that you're from and know, but oddly, even if you lived three times in that, or three lives in that city, rather, it would still retain a sense of mystery somehow, like what is a location and its impact on you and your life and memory and all that sort of thing. And often I think filmmakers, well, novelists too, painters too, there's a quality of, like a melancholy quality of nostalgia in their work. So, I could certainly plead guilty to that.

Jeff: Yeah, that's really interesting. I was going to go back, I want to go back now to the composers briefly because you mentioned, those are some of my favorite composers as well. And we play a lot of those, we play works from a lot of those composers on KVNO. And I was just, I played music from *8 ½* recently, and also occasionally we'll play music from *Cinema Paradiso*. Are those a couple films that you've enjoyed over the years?

Alexander: Yeah, no matter my opinion of the movies, the music for those two pictures is spectacular. And I didn't want this program to be a greatest hits. However, *8 ½* is going to be covered and *Cinema Paradiso* is also covered for nothing else because of the gorgeous piano part in it. And I thought it wasn't, it ultimately wasn't hurtful to the program to have some pieces which would be recognized by the audience. And I'll be asking the audience at that point to disassociate their connection to the two movies and just listen to these pieces as magnificent music on their own.

Jeff: Yeah, you know, it's interesting too, when we play those works on the radio, you're not watching the film. And maybe for some who have seen it, it is conjuring up images. Sometimes that will happen for me. But otherwise, that music is just powerful on its own, just as its own work and almost lives and breathes separately from the film.

Alexander: Yeah, I mean, we look back into recent history, recent, I mean, the last, say, you know, 60 years. Probably in the 60s, the soundtrack album of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* was a big seller. So that they both remember the film, but how blown away people were by the music at the time. And then *Star Wars*, John Williams' *Star Wars* score, I mean, you couldn't watch a movie whenever you wanted back then as you can today. You had somehow to wait for it to appear on, to be re-released in theaters or maybe be shown on TV. So, people would listen to the record just to kind of recapture some experience of the movie. And *Star Wars* became the number one selling album ever of orchestral music.

Jeff: Incredible. Well, Alexander, I appreciate you stopping by. We're out of time. But this weekend, your special event with the Omaha Symphony at the Holland, Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, all about the power of music and film. We're delighted that you could stop by for Jeff Around town and we'll see you this weekend. We'll listen this weekend as well.

Alexander: Very happy to speak with you, Jeff. Always have been. And thanks for the interest.

Jeff: Thanks so very much.

