

## Interview

1. Introduce yourself, discuss what you currently do, degrees, awards, etc

I am John Harford and am currently a full time instructor at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey. I coordinate the Visual Communication discipline and teach courses in visual design and media arts.

I have a Masters of Fine Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art and a Bachelor of Arts from Stockton University.

I have had a number of fine art exhibitions of my photography, media, and installation art including most recently a solo show at Raritan Valley.

My musical work includes the management, song arrangement/writing, and playing medieval and folk wind instruments in several bands. I've also composed three albums of electronic conceptual soundscape and played as a guest musician (mostly medieval bagpipes and renaissance recorder) with historical music acts. Most recently and actively Ashagal – (mostly) original music with folk rock elements on historic and ancient instruments.

I'm also a published author of poetry, essay and fiction in mostly underground publications. The exception to this is a poem in *Weird Tales* (Worlds of Fantasy of Horror Edition) 1994.

2. Tell us more about your background. How long have you been doing this?

I've been writing and drawing on my own nearly as long as I can recall. I began a more intensive study in the visual arts after several winding hikes through my first three years of academia. I became interested in the immediacy and focused nature of the visual arts. In truth writing was always easier for me, but the visual arts were much more challenging.

I focused on photography as my primary means of expression. To me it was about the technique and craft involved in the dark room work (this was on the cusp of digital). By the time I finished college digital media had emerged and having always had an interest in computers I began to explore digital imaging, the then infant world wide web, etc...

My first jobs out of college were commercial photography and web design/desktop publishing. I didn't like doing photography on demand so I focused on design as my main means of income. I went to graduate school and picked up skills in media arts (video, audio recording and production, multimedia and interactive interface development). With the masters I fell into teaching at first part time, then full time. Academia allows me a constant creative flow, some stability, and the freedom to do my own work.

### 3. Who are your roles models? Who inspires you?

This is an extremely complicated question for me. I would say different facets of myself, my conduct and relationships, my creativity have often been guided by different - and sometimes opposing - forces. I could name Jhonn Balance of Coil – amazing poet and composer yet riddled by demons and a bonafide borderline personality. His full formation of spiritual and mystic ethics around their music was extremely influential on that side of things. I have a long list of modern media artists who have directly influenced what I do. People often on the cusps of visual and intertwined social movements - like Francisco Goya, Gauguin and Giger.

Several of the German musicians I've had the pleasure of getting to know and learn from—members of Corvus Corax, Faun, Qntal. Brilliant musicians who have been very generous with their time and information.

Rob Zombie and most of the members of Iron Maiden. In the sense of watching how they have cultivated their careers and persona.

Of course thinkers and writers from Andre Breton and Samuel Clemens to Spare and Aliester Crowley. Yet in a few of those cases, while I admire their work, I wouldn't necessarily want them over my house. They've all fed into how I've both created work and cultivated a personal image.

On a personal level several of my mentors, notably photographers Wendel White and William Larson were extremely influential in my academic career.

### 4. Were there any early success or failures that helped you steer you along the right path?

Some of my earliest successes kept me going. I've had to work pretty hard to progress at most things. So simple things like having a successful review of my work in college. My first publication and my first few acceptances into gallery shows pushed me forward.

Failures. Plenty. Far more than successes. Failure at completion due to inaction or procrastination. Failure at skill progression due to over confidence. Failure at communication or personality management (in the case of bands, my own or others).

In terms of music, the successes were very simple in terms of building skill and getting positive feedback. But the negative feedback, such as showing up at a gig less prepared than I thought, and being told so by my mentors, was invaluable in terms of getting myself "together".

Some people can point to one big 'moment' of breakthrough in terms of success. I tend to see building blocks and learning experiences.

I generally have learned to keep all of my ideas/projects organic to a unified concept. And to follow my instincts. Now of course my instincts are also a culmination of 20 years of successes and failures.

5. What do you consider the most successful thing you have done?

Well some of my strongest successes have been quite recent. Keeping a full time job in Academia (for now) is practically a feat of wizardry in the United States. But I won't count that as a complete success until the end of this year when my reviews are done.

I however count my creative evolution of the last 4 or so years my greatest success. I've gotten to a point musically I couldn't have imagined 10 years ago. I played a couple of gigs with little or no rehearsal with a fairly well known and established act in Europe this past summer. To seasoned musicians this isn't much. To me it was a milestone. My most recent art exhibit is also the culmination of the last three to four years of conceptualization and work. It was a fairly massive undertaking to coherently fill the space. Even after 20 years in the visual arts. But it by most accounts was extremely well received.

6. Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What kind of goals have you set for yourself? Do you have a concrete plan when setting goals?

I tend to like to think in term of long term goals. It served me well in conceptualizing the art project. And as far as programming the band (Ashagal). I see it more as a trajectory rather than a finite goal. Goals are often subject to fate and the breeze of whims. Completing a goal and success is often a marriage of opportunity... And being prepared to take the opportunity when it arrives.

Where do I see myself in five years? Spending more time in Europe on the art and music scene there. How much time that will be, will depend on several factors.

7. Do you use spirituality/politics/social concerns to help shape your art?

Well quite a bit.

Occultism of one form or another has formed much of my creativity. I could say early on it was the idea of the grail, the lost ark, the source of power, the quest that drove all. Now it is the ability of occult systems to form an internally logical reality that fascinates me.

Much of my early work had the sources of Crowley, post spiritualist occultism, hermetic and medieval magic and its roots of course – Greek and Egyptian mythology. It of course went to the dark side. I 'grew up' on a steady diet of Tolkien, Lovecraft and metal of the 80s and 90s. Necronomicon and LaVey were teenage influences as well. So of course it would

come into my early drawings, painting, collage and mixed media work. This crept into my early music and sound experiments. As well as my early horror-ish fiction and dark fantasy.

As far as politics a lot of the media art work I was immersed in, right around 9-11, naturally became politicized. Especially in the emerging media field, war powers, communication, surveillance and information control were all prominent discussions. I also drew a lot of intellectual influence from Dada and (true interwar) Surrealism. Plus of course punk rock and industrial music.

Most recently much of my work has tied into both politics (in an oblique sense) and spirituality. The last 15 years or so I've gone deeper into Norse paganism. Particularly how the tribal influence and natural archetypes (often becoming Gods, Goddesses, etc...) interfaces with that of other indigenous cultures. The Ashagal project is steeped in pagan folklore inspired lyrics – particularly Northern European. The instruments and atmosphere support that. Most recently the art installation Gnipahellir was the emulation of a crossing point between the world of the living and the dead. It combined runic imagery, a labyrinth like stone structure, and video and audio recorded at a Celtic burial mound in Southern Germany. This to some degree is inherently politicized. As delving into tribal spirituality inherently brings in issues of environmentalism, a denial of quite entrenched religious norms, the embrace of mores that stray away from the mainstream. I tend to think all art is inherently political as everything is inherently political. Whether you can keep a dog or a TV is essentially a political decision.

8. I saw Loreena McKennitt perform live the other evening. She said she started out studying to be a veterinarian and that she didn't choose music, it chose her and that led her to where she is today. What do you think about that?

This is interesting to me as I live with a musician who was pulled to be a veterinarian. Sometimes we try to do what we **think** we should do instead of what we really should do. I tried this for a while. I did a number of masters level courses in Instructional Technologies. I was fairly good at it. But it wasn't remotely what I could have done the rest of my life. Much like programming. I knew I had to create things to be happy. Or at least be in a constantly creative environment.

Part of being successful I believe is knowing what you **are meant to do** and then finding or making a path to get there. Do Thou Will Shall Be The Whole Of The Law.

A lot also has to do with opportunity. And making conscious decisions that clear your path. For instance, I decided about 15 years ago I wouldn't ever have children. That to some degree has given me the freedom to be somewhat geographically and financially fluid. I have 'lucked' into situations. I have to a large degree been fortunate and able to do things like spend time in Europe learning ancient instruments. But I don't believe in "luck".

Loreena McKennitt I believe is Canadian. When you have some of your basics covered by their social system, deciding you will be a career musician instead of a 'trade' or professional career is somewhat easier. But that statement can quickly become political.