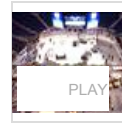




4 of 12
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Real Estate Scores
Points



5 of 12
Four Children
Die in Fire



6 of 12
Quick Change
Artists Transform
the Garden

La

A Restless Artist Saves His Sonic Mnemonic

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Since settling in New York in 1978, Stuart Argabright has banged on oil drums, landscaped for Mary Tyler Moore, pioneered the use of early computer graphics, scored a scintillating pop hit, and logged time at a simulation center for a colony on Mars, among other things. All of them were enterprising and at least a little bit unusual, but none was as signal-scrambling as the subject of his most recent offering: a series of cyber-minded soundscapes composed nearly two decades ago in the service of Keanu Reeves



Enlarge Image

Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal

Black Rain mastermind Stuart Argabright in his Manhattan home

"The concept was to be heavy, edgy, industrial, with lots of banging on metal and stuff, or maybe drum machines," said Mr. Argabright, 53, at home in Stuyvesant Town, surrounded by musical contraptions and the scent of roasted Japanese tea. That aesthetic suited his group Black Rain, with which he concocted soundtrack music for the 1995 science-fiction film "Johnny Mnemonic."

The music—shifty and dark, suffused with a suggestive sense of electronic

atmosphere—was made for a film that started as an art-house proposition but turned into a big-budget studio project. But as the production ballooned, Mr. Argabright's Black Rain music was left on the cutting-room floor, essentially erasing it from history.

Until now: Much of the work, rescued from what turned out to be a box-office and critical failure, has been compiled for a timely new Black Rain release titled "Now I'm Just a Number: Soundtracks 1994-95."

The movie, based on a story by the celebrated sci-fi writer William Gibson, starred a then-ascendant Mr. Reeves as a futuristic messenger with data-storage capabilities implanted in his brain. It was directed by Robert Longo, otherwise known as an icon of the New York art world.

Mr. Argabright was involved in it from the start. Years earlier, he had contacted Mr. Gibson after reading a review of the author's epochal novel "Neuromancer" in the Village Voice in 1984.

"I found his number through information, so I just called him and we started commiserating," Mr. Argabright said. "It used to be much easier to connect with people.

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Draghi Takes Tough Line on Austerity



The distance between people was different then."

Not long after, the kindred souls met in person at Biosphere 2, an experimental center studying space colonization in the Arizona desert.



Enlarge Image
Everett Collection
Keanu Reeves in 'Johnny Mnemonic'

"There were people in flowing robes named Andromeda and Sahara, and then some scientist or astronaut types wearing jumpsuits," said Mr. Argabright.

The setting synced in certain ways with what Mr. Argabright was doing in New York, musically and otherwise. He'd played a major role in the downtown scene of the 1980s with his post-punk band Ike Yard and his futurist hip-hop group Death Comet Crew, and he'd found

success under the name of Dominatrix, writing the 1984 club-music hit "The Dominatrix Sleeps Tonight."

"He was the closest thing to a living, breathing zeitgeist I ever met," said Mr. Longo. "He knew everything going on in all different directions, and he was always dreaming up whacked-out projects—many of which came true."

The spirit of those projects fit into a burgeoning cyberpunk culture that Mr. Argabright traced back to his childhood, when his father worked for the military on the earliest form of the Internet.

"As a kid, I was toddling around the Pentagon with my father," he said. "He couldn't talk about it much at the time, but in later years it got to a point where I was like, 'Dad, you've got to tell me everything!'"

After high school, he moved to New York and set his sites on a new realm wherein the line between man and machine began to blur. (His first job in the city, however, was as a landscaper—for the upscale likes of Bob Dylan, Rock Hudson, Mary Tyler Moore and others.) That mission eventually included his soundtrack work on "Johnny Mnemonic," as well as music for an audio-book edition of "Neuromancer."

Samples of both appear on the new Black Rain release, which is issued by the London-based record label Blackest Ever Black.

"It blew me away," label head Kiran Sande said of the first time he heard the hitherto forgotten music. "It sounds utterly contemporary, from such a complete and unique sound-world."

The story of the ill-fated movie that most of the music was made for has been consigned to history. "It was an insanely difficult experience," Mr. Longo said about the process of making "Johnny Mnemonic." "We were trying to make a black-and-white funky little movie and then we ended up with a \$26 million production. I'm happier as an artist."

But the music itself—prescient in its forecasting of contemporary trends toward dark, desiccated forms of techno—sounds striking still today.

"The movie was what it was," Mr. Argabright said. "But the money to buy us out wasn't bad, so in certain ways it was fine. We were just trying to equate American good times with this whole dark cyber-underbelly."

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