

# Imaginary Interview: Valgeir Sigurðsson | Three Imaginary Girls

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## Imaginary Interview: Valgeir Sigurðsson

I discovered the [Bedroom Community](#) label and its founder, [Valgeir Sigurðsson](#), from the Iceland Airwaves lineup. Although these names were new to me, I had already heard Valgeir's work – a lot of it in fact. **Valgeir Sigurðsson is best known as a producer and engineer for a who's-who of indie artists**, including **Björk, Nico Muhly, Bonnie "Prince" Billy**, and **Sam Amidon**, among many others. The richly layered melodies and the glitchy crackle and pop of Valgeir's own compositions are like chocolate torte beside the EDM Twinkies currently dominating electronic music.



Valgeir Sigurðsson & Bonnie 'Prince' Billy : "E...

Monday, November 12, 2012

by [Imaginary Gemma](#)

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## Community

### Interviews

#### Valgeir Sigurdsson

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Valgeir is a **tonmeister**, a German word that translates literally to “sound master,” and loosely to “holds a graduate degree in everything related to music.” His first two full-length solo albums feature luminous guests; the second one, *Draumalandið (Dreamland)*, served as the soundtrack to the biting environmental documentary of the same name. In late September, Valgeir released his third album, *Architecture of Loss*, consisting of music he wrote for Stephen Petronio’s newest ballet.

**If anyone is capable of creating a soundtrack to a dance about architecture, it is Valgeir.** Frankly, I am still awed that he took the time to speak with me over coffee at Greenhouse Studios.

**TIG:** When Stephen Petronio approached you about *Architecture of Loss*, what drew you to the project?

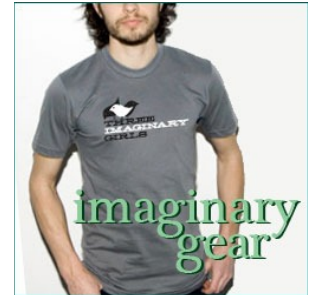
**VS:** Well, I knew of his work, and actually had worked on a score that Nico Muhly did for him a couple years earlier, released on Bedroom Community; a piece called “[I Drink the Air Before Me](#),” and I saw that piece performed in London. So immediately there was a connection, and I knew that he was doing good stuff. I was intrigued when he called me up; just the concept, the idea. He had the title in his mind already and it suggested so many things. So we started talking about the possibilities of that in sort of sound and music terms and it just seemed like something that I really wanted to explore.

**TIG:** Is that how you usually decide on new projects? Is it the artistic concept, or is it about the people?

**VS:** I find that these two things go hand in hand. If there’s an interesting angle to the project, and the people are interesting, it usually hangs together. First of all, I think, I have to feel that I can fit into it, like find a place in the project in a way that is interesting and especially new or challenging. It’s always fun to sort of throw yourself into a situation that you haven’t been in before and this was my first dance score. In general the people are as important as the content and vice versa.

**TIG:** What was the process working on the ballet?

**VS:** It was first of all just a conversation over phone and email, throwing around the possibilities of what the title suggested. And I just started sketching out musical ideas that somehow kept in mind the formation/disintegration concept of melody and sound; even suggesting loss of sound or loss of quality in sound, distortion, and all these kind of things related to loss but not necessarily grief. Then sort of the architectural side of it, the structure and the technical elements which I find that Stephen is really good at in his dance – kind of powerful movement and strong emotion. So I just started sketching out little movements of the piece and sending it to him and getting his feedback on it. When I went to see him and the company trying out things, we sort of threw in a few of my sketches and he was suggesting to his dancers different types of movements. I could really see how a group would work in one piece and a solo would work better in another piece and that’s something I hadn’t really thought about. I took that knowledge back to the studio and reworked some of the ideas and went further with others and deleted some of them that didn’t really work. Then he had these building blocks that suggested the shape of the piece and the order of the songs, as well as the titles actually. I think it was good for me, especially being the first time I worked with dance, to have a lot of the musical themes and ideas before anything else happens.



**TIG:** Was anything different with trying to fit to what ballet does, or was it more organic?

**VS:** It was pretty organic in the process but we had to structure everything very precisely, just because how they work out the movements, there's not a lot of flexibility. One thing has to follow the next without too much interruption. So actually we locked it down pretty solidly before the performance. Performing the music live to the ballet, after a few runs we became freer. It didn't throw them off that we did something with the music that wasn't exactly – and that was fun to do – just to develop it a little bit more in the performance. I mean the structure was strict, but there was freedom within the structure so you kind of find these little spaces that you can throw in new things and none of that upset anything.

**TIG:** So you never really got to just sit back and watch the ballet?

**VS:** No. When it got to the actual staging I kind of had to watch the score and the music. I could sort of look up to catch a glimpse here and there, but I could never really go out and experience it completely from the audience perspective. We were actually to the side of the stage – I had this kind of side eye view of the dancers, and it was fun.

**TIG:** You've worked in a lot of different formats – TV and film scores – how is ballet different?

**VS:** Ballet is almost like the perfect medium, I would say. Because there is so much space for music and there is no interruption in dialogue or edits that have to brutally cut the music. It's the dancers sort of sitting on the music rather than the music trying to disappear into the story or something. So I think it's a good way to perform music and still be not in the performing spotlight. It really feels like a music performance and people are really listening and taking in the whole experience and the music can be loud and present. Yes, I think it's actually a really nice combination of two art forms.

**TIG:** It's interesting that you commented on not being in the spotlight. Do you prefer that?

**VS:** Yeah, I think I prefer that. I mean, working on music in the studio is more a place I grew up in and came out of than playing in bands on stage. I was never comfortable really doing that. I've gotten more comfortable in recent years. But when I was studying classical guitar for example, the most horrifying experience that I had was to have to go up there and play a solo. I knew that I never really wanted to do that as a career. I love playing the guitar and I love learning this music, but the performance just killed me every time. So yeah, I think I found a nice way of just doing a lot of different collaborations and learning from incredible people and just being really invested in the process with Bedroom Community. That's my involvement.

**TIG:** Let's talk about Bedroom Community a little bit. It's described as a collective label. What does that mean?

**VS:** I think maybe what it means is that people feel involved. It started with me, **Ben Frost**, and Nico Muhly just really encouraging each other and making the music together in the studio. That sort of spiraled. Other people have come in, and I think even though not everybody is directly involved in every project, everybody feels some kind of attachment to them. It's like, I don't know, like a farm or something where everybody has a role or chips in and contributes, and has their own little patch of land where they're growing their own thing and people come and help out. The label is run from the studio, so it's always about creating the music. And then we kind of find the path out of the studio for it, rather than being people in an office who are detached from the process of making the music and we are just the marketing department, if that makes sense. It's like a cottage industry more than a company.

**TIG:** From a practical standpoint, I'm guessing not everybody's equally involved in the books and...

**VS:** No, that sort of falls on me and the team here. That's almost like a necessary evil. We had the studio before starting the label, and then we just structured the distribution. Now we're trying to provide the best service we can for the people involved, because we really deeply care about everything that's going on. So we sort of just take it as we go, and just try to stay on top of it. I want to try to balance that with production work that I do and with my own composition and still nurturing the other – so I'm kind of at the center of it and people are involved. Almost like different small committees of very caring friends. Everybody feels really strongly about everything that comes out on the label. It has to pass through more than just my filter.

**TIG:** Of the three friends who started the label, you are local, one is from Australia, and one from the U.S. How did it end up centered here in Iceland?

**VS:** The studio was here. I was based here. I had my home base here but at the time, before we started the label, I had been like half and half based here and in New York. That's where I met Nico. A few years before that, I had visited Australia where I met Ben, and so Ben came to visit here and decided to move. Nico was going back and forth all the time and really liked coming to Iceland and liked working here. And so between the three of us – Nico and Ben didn't really know each other before – we all just kind of met here. There was never really any big plan behind it or like meeting, 'let's do this there.' It was just, 'We have this. We can make music here.'

**TIG:** I haven't been inside a recording studio since college, and I'm sure things have changed, but it almost feels like a yoga retreat here.

**VS:** I think it's an unusual place for a city, maybe. Because we're a little bit out of the center, and this is originally an artist's workshop, it's not really built as a commercial studio in a big city would be with the extreme soundproofing to keep traffic noise out and keep the neighbors okay. The idea was to make a homey environment where you had all the technology available and then everything is just seamless. When going into studios, sometimes it's frustrating to have to spend so much time just getting ready when all you want to do is make music. So the whole idea with this place was to make the technology as transparent as possible and the work-flow really organic and musical.



**TIG:** You mentioned how as the label grows it becomes more of a challenge balancing with your own creative endeavors. How do you work that balance?

**VS:** Well, it's kind of always been a challenge. It keeps shifting a little bit. But getting asked to do something like *Architecture of Loss* is a perfect opportunity for me to say, 'I won't be doing anything else than writing music for the next few weeks.' The hardest thing for me, and probably part of the reason why my last two albums have happened as a result of other projects like film or dance, is the hardest thing for me is to say, 'Well I'm just gonna be indulging in making my next solo album that is for nothing else than my own pleasure.' That's actually what I've set out to do the next album.

**TIG:** And that feels indulgent?

**VS:** It does, yeah.

**TIG:** Well I loved *Ekvilibríum*, so I hope that you indulge some more – it's an indulgence that benefits others as well.

**VS:** At the end of the day, you hope that. The music for *Draumalandið* is maybe written for the film, but at the same time I knew that I was on my way to make my next album. So I really actually wrote it more like an album than a film score, and kind of adapted the music into the film. It doesn't appear in the same way in the film as on the album. There are nice ways to push myself into that dark corner and just think, focus on that.

**TIG:** I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on the music industry in general because you do have both the perspective of running a label and an artist – how do you see the industry moving? What do you think the future is for artists?

**VS:** I guess that there will continue to be these big million-selling artists and major labels that are going to market the music in a way that appeals to a wider...but I think the way things are moving is the artist is becoming more of a self-contained thing. And the labels, a lot of the smaller labels, I feel they almost somehow function like distribution used to. The artist might be financing and responsible completely for delivering their finished masters, artwork, and everything at their own cost and risk. The label takes it, and, you know, puts it out there. For the labels, sales of the records are not justifying the investment financially, but for the artist it does make sense. It makes sense for the artist to invest in his own work. Of course the label will then do all the admin that comes with putting out a record, because that is a lot of work. So I think independent music is becoming even more independent for the artist. An established small label is offered a lot of high quality music that is ready for release. A band that has already an identity and is ready to go out on the road and promote their work, they need their record to be available and they need people to hear it so they want to come out and see them play live. I think probably there's more music, but a smaller following for each.

**TIG:** How do you think of yourself? Do you identify primarily as a producer, a composer, an engineer? Or does that intimidating sounding degree, tonmeister, fit over top of everything?

**VS:** If I'm asked what I do, I just say that I'm a musician. You know I might come at different angles. I kind of enjoy putting on those different [hats] and looking at things from a different perspective. Having the experience from the studio, I least of all see myself as a performer or player of instruments. I enjoy performing my music now and playing with other people. I'll be doing some more touring with my new record next year. I'm looking forward to it, because I learn a lot from every performance that I do. I try to take that back into the studio. You can try out things and get the immediate reaction, because in the studio you're always kind of guessing ahead a little bit. But as far as what I would want to do, I'm sort of focusing more on the composition side these days, and for the future I think that's where I would like to spend more of my time. I almost never take on engineering gigs anymore. I feel that's just something that I know and I do for myself and my friends as a part of production or composing. I feel that's, um, almost like an area where I – [he pauses] how can I say this without sounding arrogant? Where I know what I need to know, which enables me to kind of play the studio in a creative way. If anything is my main instrument, it's probably that.

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