



Donald Knaack

The Junkman Cleans Up

By Patrick Flanary



A year ago, Donald Knaack, the classically trained composer and avant-garde percussionist known as The Junkman, faced his nemesis: a dumpster.

"I always kept everything," Knaack admits, so this cleanse was especially tough. How to begin to purge the garage, where a lifetime's worth of junk — sink parts, scrap metal, screwdrivers, and so on — dwelled, reborn as musical instruments? The answer: one piece at a time. "Certain sounds that meant a lot to me ten years ago don't mean anything now," Knaack told himself as he returned much of the pile to garbage status. He salvaged what he could, packed up what was a much leaner collection, and moved it from his home in Vermont to Virginia.

Once down South, in the kitchen at the new house, a discovery awaited Knaack. Finally, a gas range! He and his wife loved to cook. Upon closer inspection of the burner, Knaack spotted something else: little metal caps, those essential connectors that channel the flame and allow us to boil water and fry eggs. Most of us never notice such pivotal pieces. But the ever-searching Junkman had encountered the newest tool for his arsenal.

From classrooms in small towns to operas and ballet stages around the world, Knaack performs clattering symphonies, a structured cacophony of junk-percussion he calls "sound recycling." Uncovering the overlooked and undervalued materials most of us toss out without a second thought

gives Knaack purpose. He's long been a purveyor of what he calls "eco-beat" music, a fusion of classical composition with free jazz, as well as hip-hop beats with children's tunes, enriched by an eye open to all unwanted things left behind.

Since 1999, Knaack has issued a string of albums as The Junkman, their central theme a call to action to a young audience: take shorter showers, unplug appliances, use less, recycle more. Back in Vermont, Knaack's "Help Our Planet" school program, known as "H.O.P.," once received the Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence.

For Knaack's latest and most macabre recording of his 40-year career, a spoken-word mini-opera based on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," he played 100 instruments, every one of them recovered from streets and sidewalks over the years. Among them: a metal auto transmission; bamboo wind chimes; chains on wood; clappers made from paint stirrers; dowels simulating marching men; a table leg; a Tupperware juice container. And then there was a three-foot-long metallic thunder sheet stripped from a heating duct, suspended in the air, and paired with a microphone to create an echo chamber.

When it comes to creating this level of dread and tension, Knaack says, "I think density and timbre is the key element, like bowing a cymbal with a violin bow. The rosin excites the whole instrument. It can create a lot of havoc as a sound."

Knaack's interpretation of "The Raven" is the first in his evolving series, *The Poe Project*, inspired by his wife, the mystery novelist Amy Patricia Meade. Her work over the last decade on a book to dispel the many myths of Poe's life moved Knaack to revisit the writer's work. "As

a drummer and a percussionist," he says, "I found that he was so clean rhythmically. It's just sheer precision."

Michael Douglas Jones, the vocal coach Knaack works with at his opera workshops, performs the narration. Jones' voice resembles the booming tone of Boris Karloff, and he nailed it in only a few takes. It unfolds and intersects with Knaack's multiple layers across the 10-minute, 47-second piece. Composing the piece took about a year. A door shrieks open. Brass, strings, and woodwinds all chime in. Metal and wood and plastic creak and moan, sometimes in unison, other times at odds, yet increasingly unsettling with each stanza. That's a lot of buildup, considering "The Raven" has 17 stanzas in five sections, each succumbing to the spooky refrain, "Nevermore!"

"It's scary," says Knaack's friend and producer David Kahne, who mixed and mastered the single for Moo Records. "Don has a very unique way of phrasing. Great drummers always have that; there's a fingerprint to it. I think Don's thing is such a unique combination of instruments of concept, the whole ecological thing that he does, and the educational stuff."

"At the beginning, I took kabob skewers, wrapped the ends with duct tape and smacked, all sticks striking at a microscopically different time, dozens of sounds making one big sound," Knaack explains. Knaack's work has been misconstrued as a novelty act in the past, a label that diminishes his role and undermines his lifetime of composition. "It's not to be unusual," he says. "As a composer I want sounds no one else has. I've got a whole other box of crayons."

As a child in Kentucky, Knaack "grew up to the sound of brake drums hitting the concrete floor, a screwdriver hitting a drive shaft." His father was an auto mechanic and had fought in World War II. To young Donald, it all sounded like tiny songs. In third grade, the music teacher, Ms. Stall, advised him to take up the flute. Knaack adamantly refused, insisting that he would play drums instead. "Something took over," he recalls. "I was absolutely dogmatic about it, and that was not a part of my personality, especially as a kid."

Early on, Knaack became obsessed with Igor Stravinsky and Frank Zappa. And later, while attending Manhattan School Of Music in the early 1980s, one of Knaack's professors assigned some cryptic homework: "Surprise me." With that, the student wrote a brake-drum part for a chamber-orchestra setting. Mission accomplished. "It was all in my head, but the dots hadn't been connected," Knaack says. "From that point, everything started connecting."

Around that time Knaack and his first wife, Peggy, made an album together, *Inside The Plastic Lotus*, an experimental, spoken-word work of electronic minimalism. Later, under the mentorship of composer John Cage, Knaack and his own percussion ensemble set out to make the quintessential recording of Cage's "Three Constructions," his tribute to the work of the poet e.e. cummings.

While Knaack's recording career dates back some four decades, The Junkman didn't officially appear until 2000, the year he trademarked the name. While teaching a student workshop, a young boy shouted, "Hey, Junkman!" It stuck. It was a significant year, emotionally and



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creatively. Peggy died around the time Knaack was scoring a ballet for the choreographer Twyla Tharp. “He was determined to kind of absorb that tragedy into his work, which is what an artist does. So I was very committed to his process, and we worked at a distance in realizing the whole piece,” remembers Tharp, whose re-formed dance company premiered *Surfer At The River Styx*, composed by Knaack and Kahne, in North Carolina later that year.

That ballet ends with the sound of wind chimes, which Knaack made from an assortment of vintage brass keys. He used two strands, tying 25 keys tightly to each one, which allowed them to strike one other and vibrate freely while suspended in front of a microphone. “They kind of play themselves,” he says. “It is probably the most beautiful sound I have ever heard in my life.”

“He has a very good idea of construction, because in music, construction is very important,” says the composer Lalo Schifrin, who has worked with Knaack and written more than 100 scores, including for *Mission Impossible*. “He works in cycles, and he doesn’t repeat the cycles completely; he brings back one cycle and makes a bridge. In classical music, we call it *rondo*. And in jazz we had drummers like Buddy Rich and Max Roach who used that kind of construction in their solos.”

If Knaack were to pinpoint another significant moment in his career, it would be when he traveled to war-torn Croatia in 1997. Six years before, militant Serbs slaughtered civilians in a Croat village, bombed a church, and left many for dead. “It was the first time in my life I’d been that close to devastation,” Knaack says. “That was the event that just completely changed a lot about me and my thinking.” He joined a group of students to stage an improv performance at the destroyed church in Voćin. Their instruments: artillery shells recovered from the rubble.

“It was a religious experience. Everybody that was involved was transported, and eventually we all kind of came back to life.” Twenty years later, Knaack holds close two pieces he kept from that trip: a piece of shrapnel riddled with bullet holes, and an artillery shell with Russian markings.

Later this year, the 11-member group Les Percussions de Strasbourg will serve as Knaack’s percussion orchestra for the first performances of his *Odin: The Opera*. They will play only junk and recycled materials. “The Raven” will soon fly into colleges and clubs when Knaack and Jones perform the piece with full symphony orchestras internationally. Work has already begun on “The Bells,” the second volume of *The Poe Project*.

Knaack is fond of quoting the French artist Marcel Duchamp: “Tools that are no good require more skill.”

“And that’s kind of what I do,” he says. “I hopefully make music that people want to hear from stuff they didn’t want.”

Think you’ll ever again junk the little pieces life drops in your path?

Nevermore! 🎧

