

Trusting His Creative Instincts Duncan Sheik Finds a Big Audience for His Songwriting

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The first time I heard Duncan Sheik perform was at an American University Group talent show at Soka University of America two-and-a-half years ago. He has come a long way since then. Now I hear him every day on the radio; his song “Barely Breathing” is an international hit, and his first CD, Duncan Sheik, is gaining much attention in the press. I had a chance to talk to him recently about his start in music and how his Buddhist practice has helped.

JF: Was your original dream to become a musician?

DS: Yeah, since I was a little kid, actually. Since I was 9 years old I’ve been playing guitar and the keyboards and anything I could get my hands on really.

JF: When did you join the SGI-USA?

DS: It was the summer of 1989. I was going to Brown University at the time. I was kind of studying Eastern religions in general. I went to visit my aunt, Mari Gorman — she’s a pretty well-known L.A. Buddhist figure; she’s been practicing for close to 30 years now. So she taught me how to chant and brought me from the world of theory to the world of practice. She got me in front of the Gohonzon.

JF: After you graduated from Brown, then you started pursuing your musical career?

DS: Yes. Actually, while I was at Brown, my sophomore year, I played guitar for Lisa Loeb. But I was still recording my own music and doing my own thing as well. When I graduated from college in 1992, I moved to Los Angeles and started doing a lot of Gajokai activities and practicing hard.

That’s when I got signed to my first record deal with Immortal Records, part of Epic. It was an inappropriate place for me to be, but it served its purpose in that it kept me afloat. Then I was in business limbo for a couple of years. In 1993 and 1994 I was wondering whether or not I was ever going to get to make the CD.

JF: How did your current deal with Atlantic come about?

DS: Basically what happened was that through Immortal I got signed to a publishing deal with BMG as a songwriter. I wrote many, many songs and recorded a lot of songs during 1993 and 1994, which came to the attention of people at Atlantic. On the strength of those songs, they came up to the house I was living in at the time, in Laurel Canyon — the president of the company, the general manager and some A & R people — and I just played a show for them in my living room. They signed me a month after that.

JF: Were you nervous when they came over?

DS: Yeah, it was rather a tense night for me. But the show went very well. I was luckily able to pull myself together.

JF: Does your Buddhist practice help you with writing songs?

DS: Definitely. Anything that you do, in general, goes better if you've done gongyo first. So, of course, in terms of my creative energy and having a positive sense about what I'm doing, it helps enormously. I think it also keeps me in touch with that universal human sensibility to really reach out to people.

JF: What was the hardest time in your career?

DS: The first three or four months I was in Los Angeles before I got the first record deal. They were pretty lean. I didn't have a job, I didn't have a lot of money — you know, the same old story. Then luckily I got the first thing, and it gave me some money to keep my head above water.

And after that, about six months later when the excitement of that died down, it got tough again because I didn't know if I was ever going to get to make this record. There was a period of a year there where nobody really knew what was going to happen. But I did a lot of Gajokai activities and was very active in my district. I was definitely practicing hard.

JF: What do you like about doing Gajokai?

DS: I've had my own struggles with doing Gajokai and Soka Group ever since the day I started them. I think they were struggles with my own ego — of having to dress up in silly outfits and having to stand around feeling like a complete idiot. But ultimately, looking back on it, I think they really helped me to be not such a self-conscious person.

I went through a real struggle when I first started my career because I could not sing in public at all. I was so self-conscious about my voice. And I think through doing Gajokai and challenging myself in that way I was able to overcome that, become much stronger and say, "No matter what, I'm going to perform the best I can — no matter how ridiculous the situation may seem."

JF: You must be very busy now.

DS: It's getting crazy. In fact, since right after New Year's it's been nonstop because the first single has become a big radio hit and it's on MTV in active rotation. The whole nine yards is hitting me at once at this moment, so I'm just trying to take a deep breath and get ready.

There are definitely a lot of days where I'll have to chant at 5:00 in the morning because I have to go do some local TV news show at 6:00, or I won't be able to do gongyo until 1:00 in the afternoon because of whatever crazy reason. There's no routine — every day is a new day.

JF: In your CD you thank SGI President Ikeda. How has President Ikeda's guidance encouraged you in your career?

DS: There are many things that he has written about being a creative person and what it means to manifest your artistic creativity. There's a very strong, general sense that I get from him of how important it is to move other people's hearts. Whatever it is that you're creating, it's important that it's not just a selfish endeavor but that you're really able to

reach out and move other people through your art.

Realizing that was a very important turning point for me, because I think for most of my life playing music was a self-involved activity. Of course I always wanted to make records, but it was always kind of just for my own benefit. Now I see the importance of creating value for other people as well.

JF: Do you meet a lot of fans who have been touched by your songs?

DS: Every day, at every show that I play. There is always someone coming up to me saying how spiritual my CD sounds. A lot of people will come up to me and say: “Do you practice? Are you Buddhist?” That’s a really enjoyable part of the whole process.

JF: What would you say to others who have the same dream you did?

DS: The important thing is to trust your instincts and trust what’s in your own musical heart, so to speak. I don’t think you can be really commercially minded or pop-minded and make great music. I think you have to do something that moves you and is powerful for you. And that way I think it will ultimately be very powerful for other people.

Trust your instincts, no matter how crazy they may seem at the time because time will prove you probably to be correct if you just go with your heart in any creative matter, no matter what it is. I think the important thing is not to sell yourself short and not to copy other trends but to blaze a new trail.

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