

Interview with Eric Tschaepeler

By Dave Stewart

Eric Tschaepeler is a Montreal based artist and musician currently enrolled in the MFA program (photography) at Concordia University. Our Zoom chat included celebrity encounters, thoughts on music, and a discussion of Eric's photography practice.

He was doing much cooler things than me in 1989.



Eric Tschaepeler performing at CBGB (1989 / 1990)

How would you explain who you are and what you do to a 5 year old?

I don't interact with 5 year olds that much, so this is a tough question!
Maybe something along the lines of "I play music and I take photographs" or, " I try to share ideas using a different language". I think that sharing ideas is important.

In the Hollywood film about your life, who plays you?

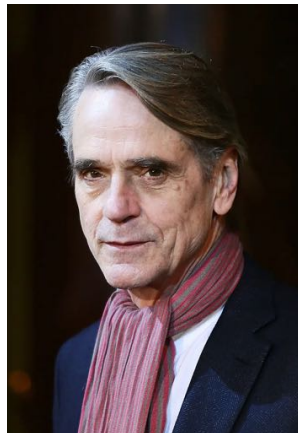
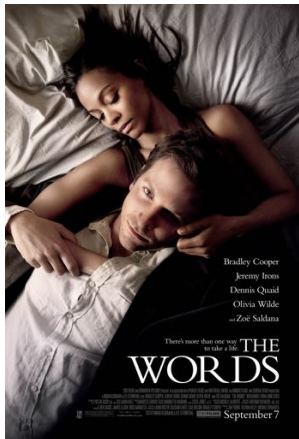
I've often been compared to Richard Gere, but I'm going to go with Paul Newman. Maybe Steve McQueen?

I was going to say you could be played by Jeremy Irons.

Funny story, I was a stand in for Jeremy Irons.

You're kidding! How'd that happen?

I've been doing acting gigs for a long time, and my agent sent me for an interview to be Jeremy Irons' stand-in for a film titled "The Words" - a story about a struggling writer (Bradley Cooper) who plagiarizes a manuscript he finds in an antiques shop. When I got to the office, Jeremy was sitting there with the casting director! The casting director asked how tall I was. Turns out I'm two inches shorter than Jeremy, so there was a hesitancy about hiring me. However, Jeremy jumped in to my defense saying the height difference wasn't a big issue because he slouches a lot. He then walked around the trailer with an exaggerated slouch. Spoke French too!



So did you have big Hollywood dreams?

I had big music dreams growing up, acting was just a side thing. Sometimes your agent gets you little support gigs. I even played a photographer on tv a few times. I've been doing acting jobs since I was twenty, and got my first job on a Nick Cage film (Vampire's Kiss) when I was a busboy in NYC in my twenties.

As a musician I've done a lot of travelling and that (music) was the "big dream".

What kinds of places have you travelled to?

I did some recording in Jamaica, New York, Europe,

Is it weird that our idea of New York is actually just other cities pretending to be New York? I've heard the classic New York alleyway doesn't exist!

You're one of the only people who has brought this up. I did a series of photographs called "Kitchen Staff", where I'd take photos of 'back of house' kitchen workers. Dishwashers, cooks, pretty much everyone that doesn't get seen. The photos were taken in alleyways in Montreal behind the kitchen of each restaurant. I wanted to expand the series and shoot in other cities I've lived, but when I looked at Manhattan for instance, it seems like every back alley has been commercialised into store fronts. Montreal has quite special alleyways for North America. I wanted to show a more updated version of the faces we have in this city.



Restaurant kitchens aren't known for being calm, low stress workplaces. Was it difficult to find people who would let you photograph them?

I brought prints of what I'd shot up to them and explained I wanted to bring the hidden back of house staff into the light. They usually liked the idea.

On your website you mention these photos were taken between lunch to dinner transition (3-5pm). Was that only because the kitchen staff weren't busy, or were there certain lighting situations you were also looking for?

Fall and Winter light in Montreal is pretty feeble, not in a snowy area perhaps, but in downtown alleyways by 4:30pm light can be dim and you don't get enough for much depth of field. But that is also the break between lunch and dinner shifts where they can afford a bit of time.



I remember seeing one of your photos from the “Child Free” series in the VA gallery. The color and lighting is really balanced and understated in this series. Did you work analog or do some post production after shooting?

I shot on medium format film for that series and I also brought in my own lighting. You need a lot of light if you are to freeze any movement with at least a 30th of a second shutter speed and if you want the background sharp enough to make out peoples mementos. I also wanted the light diffused and even.



The “Unrequited Love” series has a really dry sense of humor to it. I’m not very knowledgeable about photography, but the humor in these photos reminded me a bit of Rodney Graham and Jeff Wall. Do you have any strong photographic influences?

I prefer to get my inspiration from other artforms - films, books, music mostly. As far as photographers : Rineke Dijkstra, Larry Sulten, Tina Barney, Polidori , August Sander. And I love humour Monty Python, Little Britain, Family Guy. The more abstract the better.

If this were a normal 2020, what would you be doing right now?

Summer is the work season for actors, so I'd probably be an extra on sets. There was a big Roland Emmerich film that was going to be shot here. I also had a continuity role in a web series called "The Bold Type", the story revolves around 3 women working for a fashion magazine, kinda like Sex and the City. I played the house photographer and would have been working on that as well. It was mostly background, but I did have a few lines on a couple of episodes. A lot of things shoot between May to November in Montreal, and the money I make from acting pays the bills for the rest of the year. Or it did anyway.

I just googled "The Bold Type", it got 98% on Rotten Tomatoes!

Yeah, it's pretty good! The critics like it. They try to touch on current issues.

What are you missing most about school right now?

As a photographer it's not so much about studios (I mean the little office we get), but the facilities. I never really used my office and since I mostly shoot on location I rarely use the shooting studios, but I'm really missing the high quality negative scanner and printers.

What is a high quality negative scanner?

I shoot a lot in film. 35mm cameras use film that you wind. Large format cameras use a special size of negatives 4 x 5 inches and up, and you get amazing resolution, much better than with a digital camera. When you see the big prints in a gallery, they're usually done on large format film. At Concordia you can make really big prints, 5x8 feet. Out in the real world you're paying hundreds of bucks for that, but at Concordia you can do it for fifty.

If you could be a fly on the wall in any artist's studio throughout history (any medium) who would you choose?

David Bowie.

Great choice! Which album would you like to see get produced?

One of my favourites is Scary Monsters. It's so layered orchestrally. The percussion, voices, guitars, keyboards. I love it.



I might have to go with Hunky Dory. Any thoughts on that album?

I don't know it that well. I'm more into the stuff he did with Brian Eno.

What do you think Eno brought to the table?

The atmosphere and mood. The ambient side of things is what he contributed and probably more. Heroes is a good example of Eno and Bowie collaborating to create a new sound. Or at least a sound that was new to popular Western audiences in the seventies and early eighties.

So much great stuff was coming out then, what was the secret sauce?

Eno and Bowie were recording in Berlin for the song "Heroes" and there was a real darkness that they picked up on. The more experimental German artists probably rubbed off on them a bit. It wasn't as Blues based as music in America.

As a seasoned musician, what would you say to someone who learned a few chords on the guitar during isolation, but kinda hit a wall and stopped? I'm asking for a friend, it's totally not me.

Pick a few simple songs you like and learn them. It's very satisfying and encouraging to see results quickly. I was never one for exercises or practicing scales. And as soon as you can, play with other people - that's the joy. Then start inventing stuff.

Questionnaire Answers

- **Do you have a recurring dream/nightmare in your sleep?** I used to dream of flooding. Once the dream was so vivid I started carrying my younger brother out of the house.
- **Best places to "accidentally" bump into you?** Parking lot of the casino after a winning night.
- **What historical figure, living or dead, would you most like to have dinner with?** Anaïs Nin.
- **If Hollywood made a movie about your life, who should play you?** Mads Mikkelsen.
- **If you could reincarnate as a plant, which one would you be?** Welwitschia mirabilis. Desert plant that lives 1500 years.
- **If you could be texture, what would it be?** Fuzzy.
- **Which superpower would you like to have?** Teleportation.
- **Do you believe that alternate universes exist, and if yes, what universe are you currently in?** Yes. I have tentacles in all of them.
- **Is there any artist that you would like to share your studio with?** Iggy Pop.
- **If a wizard ambushed you in the park and made you choose, what category of food would you give life and be forced to keep as your best friend?** Hors d'oeuvres.
- **What is the oldest piece of art that you have kept of your own creation?** Listen Audio recording sessions (1979).
- **What is the most bizarre thing that you've ever done that most other people probably have not done?** Made photocopies for Philip Glass.