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HOLLYBROOD

THE AMAZING DANNA BROTHERS HAVE SCORED BIG IN L.A.

HOLLY

Award-winning film composers Mychael and Jeff Danna are independently



Jeff Danna

There's nothing like a bond between brothers. In Mychael and Jeff Danna's case, the two share a lot — a love of music, a job composing movie soundtracks — but one experience they have in common that many siblings don't is a near career-ending hand injury.

"My hand went through a window when I was 14," says Mychael on the phone from his L.A. home. "I ripped up nine tendons and an artery. There was blood gushing everywhere." Jeff, on conference call from his home in Pasadena, chimes in, "I had really bad tendonitis and some carpal-tunnel issues in my left hand. After 10 years of that, and a football injury in my shoulder that pinched some nerves, my left hand never really worked."

For Mychael and Jeff, piano and guitar players respectively, this was about the worst thing that could have happened to them. "It really sucked," Jeff says bluntly. "I was just walking around going, 'Now what am I supposed to do with this?'" "The nerve that got cut was the worst thing," says Mychael about his accident. "Even now I don't have feeling in that hand. My left hand will never get past Grade 6 conservatory."

The Dannas acknowledge that it's rare for siblings to experience similar hand injuries, but what came next is even more exceptional. The brothers, both unable to play their instruments, turned to composing. "It wasn't something we planned at all," says Mychael. "It just kind of happened. He had a feel for it, I guess, and I had it too. Why were we both drawn to film scoring? I can't really explain that."

All they knew was that they weren't going to let their injuries keep them from careers in music. "It seemed so horrible at the time," Mychael says, "but I probably would never have got into writing. I had no other options from then on and I never looked back." Jeff's post-injury attitude is much the same. "Sometimes things will happen that will change the course of your life," he says. "At the time it seems like a really bad change, but doors open up when others close. I certainly wouldn't be in film music without that injury."

The brothers now have thriving film-scoring careers. Mychael's responsible for the soundtracks behind movies such as *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Capote* and *Ararat*, while Jeff's taken a more populist route, scoring *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* and *O*. The two have also worked together on a number of projects, including the recently released thriller *Fracture* and the 2005 Terry Gilliam drama *Tideland*.

After listening to their comfortable, familial banter, it's hard to believe

BROOD

successful but also make a great writing team **By Bryan Borzykowski**

these two weren't always collaborating. But growing up in Burlington, Ont., Mychael, who's older than Jeff by six years, had his own interests, which naturally didn't involve his younger brother. "You can't really have that much to do with each other," says Jeff. "When Myke was 15 and I was nine, there wasn't a whole lot of common ground."

What did bond them, though, was their passion for music. "We both started with the piano and church choir," says Mychael. "When we were seven or eight, that's when we started taking formal lessons. We were immersed in music all the time around the house."

For Mychael, it was classical music that interested him most, but like many musical teens growing up in the '70s, the piano player honed his chops jamming on rock 'n' roll. "I played keyboards with some friends, and that pulled me into that world." But his classic rock dreams weren't nearly as developed as his brother's. Jeff grew up dreaming of being in a band, complete with a record deal and publishing contract.

Despite their shared interest, the two only played together a handful of times, in part because Mychael was attending the University of Toronto to take creative music composition. While there, the future Genie- and Gemini award-winner wrote music for theatre, produced bands and did whatever else "was fun and where writing could be a possibility."

His foray into feature-film composing began while he was working on a short movie with a friend of director Atom Egoyan's. That friend put the two in touch. "Atom was looking to do his first big feature, and that was the beginning of my film career," says Mychael.

Thanks to his big brother, Jeff, who also went on to win a Genie and two Geminis, was able to find work writing for films too, specifically Mychael's. In the late '80s and early '90s, Mychael enlisted Jeff to contribute guitar parts to some of his scores. "We did about three or four Canadian indie films together," says Jeff, whose hand had just enough movement to play his brother's scores. "That was my apprenticeship and training ground."

"It was something he immediately had a touch for," says Mychael. "When he was improvising, he'd come up with great ideas. I gave him some cues to write and for someone who had had no instruction, he had a real good feel for what was needed. Within a year he was scoring his own stuff."

With Jeff setting his sights on his older sibling's profession, it would be hard to blame Mychael if he felt some animosity towards his younger brother. But he's quick to point out that their relationship is



Mychael Dana

one of mutual admiration, not competition. "Sibling rivalry happens when you're two years apart, but because we're six years apart, I never really felt that," he says. "I was more impressed and proud that he had that ability."

It helps that Mychael and Jeff forged out two distinctly different careers. The former made his name in the art-film world, composing for movies such as *Lilies*, a French Canadian film about homosexuality, and several Egoyan motion pictures, including *Exotica* and *The Adjuster*. As his projects got bigger, Hollywood began calling, but Mychael never abandoned his indie-film roots, scoring *Girl, Interrupted*, *Being Julia* and Deeptha Mehta's *Water*, to name a few acclaimed but relatively low-budget films.

Jeff on the other hand, went the TV route. His first big project was *Sweating Bullets*, a Canadian-made show about an ex-RCMP agent who moves to Florida. "We used to call it guns and bikinis," he jokes. He went on to scoring *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* and episodes of *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Just as their careers are distinct, so is their music. Mychael has a penchant for knocking out tunes layered with multicultural sounds, while Jeff gives his soundtracks a more epic, bombastic treatment. (Consider *Little Miss Sunshine's* "First Push" — a rollicking Americana-meets-East India tune — and *Resident Evil: Apocalypse's* adrenaline-fuelled "Alice Battles the Nemesis" to compare styles.)

With years of experience behind them, Mychael and Jeff can pretty much succeed at scoring any genre on their own. But together? That's when they're at their best. "The same landscape for collaboration that exists now was set up a long time ago," says Jeff. "The first time I worked with Myke, I noticed that he was the first person I had ever known who wanted to work as hard as I did." "It's really hard for writers to work together," says Mychael. "There are issues of ego and ownership and territory. Those are issues we don't have so much."

But writing together doesn't mean they revert back to the usual older/younger brother routines. Both Danna are equal partners in the process. "We start out in a room together coming up with the idea of what the film's score is," says Mychael. "There's no music writing for a while, it's just a lot of talking. Then maybe we'll divide things up — Jeff will write a theme and send it over to me, I'll tweak it and send it back."

Because the brothers know each other so well, they don't have to physically be together to collaborate. With *Tideland*, Jeff spent a lot of time in London, England, while Mychael was shuttling back and forth between Toronto and L.A. "We have the same composition [software] programs," says Jeff, "so we're able to be in different rooms, cities or countries and e-mail files back and forth." Other times Jeff will make the trek to Mychael's L.A. home to write and record, because as Jeff says, "Mychael's more central."



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However they record, no one can argue with the results. *Fracture*, their most recent collaboration, is a lush, complex collection of haunting background music that combines both their strengths. It's the ideal soundtrack for a thriller starring Anthony Hopkins. "Fracture was a big-budget studio film, but the creative process was great," says Jeff. "The director, Gregory Hoblit, was a veteran guy who knows what he wants. It was a very smooth path for us, because we knew who we were writing for and who to answer to musically."

That ease was more the exception than the rule, especially when it comes to big Hollywood flicks. In cases where the movie looks like it might bomb, directors often rely on the composer to save the film. That's an impossible task, says Mychael. "The

films with the most pressure are the ones that aren't really working," he says. "They look to music to solve problems that are really unsolvable. Everyone's hoping you're going to bail the boat out, but while music can make a good film great, it can't make a bad film good."

But more often than not, things do go right, sometimes even better than expected. "When I was working on *Little Miss Sunshine* there was nobody working on that film who thought it was going to do what it did," says Mychael. "Absolutely no one." And the film didn't just do well for its production company — Mychael was nominated for Grammy.

Awards, big-budget films and Hollywood aside, when it comes down to it, Mychael and Jeff are just two brothers who were lucky enough to find a career they can share. And while creatively, they couldn't ask for anything more, having a sibling who runs on a similar schedule helps outside of the studio too. "We're coming over for hamburgers," says Jeff after Mychael says he has to go. "I'm bringing my tribe over to invade your estate."

Bryan Borzykowski is a Toronto-based music writer whose secret dream is to pen music for movies. But he'll let the pros handle that, and instead watch Little Miss Sunshine on repeat.

■ FYI

Publishers: Jeff Danna Music; Mychael Danna Music, Mychael Danna Music II and Summerland Music, plus others.
Selected filmography: Mychael Danna: *Dance Me Outside* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), *Ararat* (2002), *Vanity Fair* (2004), *Capote* (2005), *Tideland* (2005), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Fracture* (2007). Jeff Danna: *Cold Comfort* (1989), *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* (1992), *O* (2001), *The Matthew Shepard Story* (2002), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), *Tideland* (2005), *Fracture* (2007)
SOCAN members since 1992 (Jeff), 1994 (Mychael)
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