



CORDIS: Behind the Music

“My house is in a wooded area, similar to the environment I knew growing up in West Virginia,” he says. “It’s very peaceful, very quiet. And I take writing breaks to watch bluebirds and finches dart in and out of the birdhouse trailer park I built in my backyard.”

“He” is Richard Grimes, the mind behind **cordis**, a four-man band considered to be a true maverick in its post-rock rendering of chamber music. “Melodies and initial creative ideas sometimes come out of thin air, so I end up scrambling to find something to record them with — I’ve used anything from my answering machine to my phone,” Grimes continues. “As soon as time permits, I flesh the idea out on my beloved Wurlitzer upright. I grew up with that thing — it has working-class simplicity about it and the ideas seem to flow best when we work together.”

Those ideas have been flowing for more than 15 years, first as the Richard Grimes Collective (RGC), and now, for the last decade, as cordis. Comprising the four-man band is electric cimbalomist (and founder/primary composer) Richard Grimes, multi-percussionist Andrew Beall, electro-acoustic cellist Jeremy Harman and pianist/keyboardist Dan Padgett.

Grimes describes his bandmates as family, and each member adds a unique and vital component to the project. “Andy’s dedication to cordis runs deep and always has. He gets the vision and knows how to make things happen without the need for hand-holding.” Grimes says of Beall, who has been with him since the beginning of cordis. Originally from Columbus, OH, Beall is based in New York City where he is also the percussionist in Broadway’s *Lion King* and composes Broadway scores. The rest of cordis is Boston-based. “Jeremy hails from Kansas City and is dedicated to making everything he does be all it can be,” Grimes shares about Harman, who also used to be a guitarist in a death metal band. “His early guitar work is what makes him amazing on the electric cello. He knows how to create tone through pickups and electronics. Very few professional string players get this, but he nails it.” In terms of the group’s collective sound, Grimes says Dan Padgett, the group’s newest member, will be the glue that holds it all together. “He’s taking on a very difficult chair here — but he shares our passion for constructing sound. We’re all united in that front.”

The band’s sound borders on a gritty rock/punk aesthetic, but because the members were classically trained and steeped in chamber music, the resulting sound is not postured on loud and fast, but rather more developed and cerebral. Think Stravinsky meets Sigur Ros. In addition to cordis’ signature timbre of the electric cimbalom, the group further crafts their sound by weaving one-of-a-kind creations such as electric mbiras, modified typewriters, pitched wind tubes, 19th-century talking machines and the world’s longest-playing cylinder-driven music box into performances.

“I was at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore when my teacher took our studio to Philadelphia to attend the Percussive Arts Society International Convention. At that event I first saw Victoria Herencsar play the cimbalom,” Grimes said. “Bells went off and I just knew that was the instrument I was going to end up working with. It took me 10 years to get my first cimbalom, and travel to Hungary and work with Viki, but, like everything else in my career, I just kept dreaming ‘til the dream came true.”

Cordis' unique sound is framed around Grimes' self-created electric cimbalom, a one-of-a-kind instrument born out of a very gradual evolution. "The more I played the cimbalom — and my vision for what would become cordis was crystallizing — the more I realized I needed to expand the capabilities of my instrument," Grimes explains. "The traditional cimbalom has an abundance of unique overtones that are responsible for its definitive 'twangy' sound. When I first started writing for the instrument in RGC, I would fight those overtones, try to ignore them. But I couldn't. Then one night it just hit me: 'if you can't beat 'em, see if you can join 'em,'" he continues. "The way I use pickups, pedals and amplifiers now works with those overtones. What used to be my curse has evolved into something of a savior for me, creatively."

Percussionist Andrew Beall, an original member of cordis, loves to tell stories through music and is often inspired by stories as well. "I remember when I was nine or 10 years old and I saw a drummer grooving with a band at some outdoor festival ... everyone was dancing to his beat and it was a fascinating cause-and-effect — both to the crowd and to me. I knew then what I was going to do, and what really keeps me going now is the drive to share music with the world."

The group's rehearsal space is located in rural Massachusetts, about 90 minutes west of Boston. And while the members each lead somewhat disparate lives outside of cordis, a close bond remains. "We all keep in touch on a daily basis via phone/email/text. Sometimes business, sometimes idiocy ... usually business laced with idiocy," Grimes says with a laugh. "We all have an identity in the band and all get along very well. I'm the ringleader, Jeremy is quality control, and Andy is hardcore NYC, spinning 10 things at once. Literally, he'll be having a creative meeting with his lyricist while he's tweaking his setup before sound check! I've never known him not to be that way, but his devotion runs deep."

They tour in "Big Blue," often filled with banter and sarcasm between friends, but also a lot of creativity and creation. "One of my favorite concert moments was backstage in Culver, Indiana, on a recent tour," says Beall. "Richard and I were walking up from the Green Room to the backstage holding area when we heard the clamor of 1,500+ in the house — you know, that anticipation and excitement before a show. Richard and I looked at each other with history in our eyes, smiled knowingly, and walked out on stage to the eruption of screaming applause. The show was one of our best on the tour. But most importantly, we had that moment."

Keeping the band grounded, Grimes often chases positive events in the cordis journey with the assurance that "the best is yet to come." So far, these words ring true. With a new album on deck, there is a self-assured air of excitement and anticipation among the group, and a determination to see the project enter a phase of transition: from new to next.

Back in his wooded and peaceful composing space, Grimes shares, "I like to do fine-scale building in my free time ... replicas of various period styles in miniature scale. I even do it in my hotel room on tour. It helps to center me, relax me, and take my mind off of everything around me."

When at home, Grimes spends much of his time writing new music, collaborating with the cordis production team on endless details necessary to develop their extensive live show, and acquiring and maintaining the ensemble's array of instruments. Nearly everything he does influences the mission of cordis. "...at least, until my little girl bursts in. I become a very different person at that point. In a split second, my focus shifts from an intense indulgence in my own creative interests to immersing myself in the interests of a five year old," Grimes says, smiling. "This is what I'm supposed to be doing. Reaching out to something bigger than myself."