

# ANXIOUS RHYTHMS: Film composer Antonio Sanchez to perform ‘Birdman+Live Drum Score’ at the Zellerbach Theater

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**About halfway through the Oscar-winning film “Birdman,”** washed-up actor Riggan Thomson (played by Michael Keaton) finds himself sprinting half-naked through the middle of Times Square. Panic-stricken, and wearing nothing but a snug pair of tighty-whities, he pushes through hordes of tourists looking for a way off the street.

It’s a comical, high-energy sequence, and it’s carried along by an anxious and erratic drum score (composed by Antonio Sanchez), a scrambling mass of cymbals, bass, and snare that continues to build for entire minutes, the intensity growing with it.

*Image from Fox Searchlight*

It doesn’t take long for tourists to start recognizing Thomson. They close in on him. They gawk at him. They take aim with their phones.

“You’re becoming a trending topic,” Thomson’s daughter, Sam, tells him a while later, scrolling through Twitter. The video of his stunt has received 350,000 views in less than an hour, she explains. Likes and shares continue to pour in before her eyes.

As Thomson looks at her phone with mild interest, not quite getting why this is a big deal, Sam leans in and, with great reverence, whispers, “Believe it or not, this is power.”

**Rewatching “Birdman” in November 2016,** it’s difficult not to see something eerily prescient in those words.

Mere days after the election of perennial-viral-sensation Donald J. Trump to the highest office in the United States, we can now be sure beyond doubt that a popular video, or an outrageous tweet shared by thousands, does indeed translate to real-world power.

The fact that the video in “Birdman” features an over-the-hill egomaniac streaking through the public eye makes the scene even more relevant and poignant a metaphor. If the movie opened today, critics might pan the sequence for being a little too on the nose.

Keeping all this in mind, I guess it makes sense that during my recent interview with Antonio Sanchez, the jazz virtuoso responsible for “Birdman’s” frenetic drum score, the conversation eventually moves toward Trump and the anxiety the man engenders in so many Americans.

“I really feel anxious,” Sanchez, who will be performing live during a screening of “Birdman” in Philly later this week, tells me not 24 hours before the General Election. “I hope we can wake up on Wednesday and feel like we dodged a bullet. I really do.”

Sanchez, who was born in Mexico City and became a U.S. citizen this year, has obvious reasons to lament our now-president-elect, and those feelings are best summed up in the working title for his next solo record: “Bad Hombre.”

“I wanted to name it ‘Bad Hombre,’” he says, as an allusion to Trump’s denigrating remark during the final presidential debate: “We have some bad hombres here and we’re gonna get ‘em out.”

Over the phone, Sanchez tells me he’s feeling some pre-election dread; however, the scariest part of a Trump presidency, he says, isn’t so much the man but “the overtones, the racial overtones, and the nationalistic speech, and all that rhetoric that resonates with a lot of people.”

“You know, I travel around the country a lot and I can feel the vibe sometimes. And to be a brown person in this country now — it is not a good time to be a brown person.”

Ironically, this kind of visceral dread and anxiety feels infused into the score for “Birdman,” the drummer’s first film project, which, in the spirit of jazz, he nearly entirely improvised during recording sessions. Frantic and pulsating, it’s like a two-hour spiking heart rate.

From the opening scene on, the film “starts getting a little more stressful,” he says, “and there’s more anxiousness, there’s all these very human emotions that are happening all the time. It’s anger and stress.” The drums, he decided, should feed into that tension, like stoking flames.

“We realized the drums were really a good vehicle for all this because it doesn’t spell out entirely what you’re supposed to be feeling,” he says. Unlike so many modern film scores, with their well-timed strings and minor chords, Sanchez didn’t want to spoon feed the audience their emotional cues.

“One of the things I liked about this approach was that it kind of leaves it up to you a little bit. It’s a little unpredictable, a little more ethereal, a little bit more subjective, and I kind of like that vagueness about the movie,” he says.

When he plays the score live — he’s currently touring the country and will be bringing “Birdman+Live Drum Score” to the Annenberg Center for Performing Arts Nov. 19 — he says he remains true to the original music while conjuring something unique in the moment.

“I try to stay faithful to the spirit of improvisation,” he says. “We wanted to achieve something that was very organic and felt organic and felt like it was being created in the moment.” He says he tells his audience “that I’m going to be playing something that is completely different from what I did the night before or what I will do the following night.”

*Photo by Fernando Aceves / The Antonio Sanchez Quartet in Mexico City 2008*

He adds, “It’s something very unique that you don’t really get to see, ever; just a drummer in a movie theater, playing along to this kind of movie.”

**Before we end the interview**, I tell Sanchez that I hope he does name his next album “Bad Hombre,” and that I hope Wednesday morning brings him a sigh of relief; that we, in his words, dodge a bullet.

“I hope so,” he says, but “even if we do, there’s a lot of damage that has been inflicted and it is not going away. ... That’s my main concern right now: how frenzied people can get when you have somebody that they feel is representing their demagoguery and their xenophobic spirit.

“That’s my main worry.”

Wednesday morning, around the time Hillary Clinton was delivering her concession speech, I emailed Sanchez. As of press time, he hasn’t responded. I like to think he’s just busy in his home studio, huddled over his kit, lost in the music, banging out all that stress and worry and anxiety.