

Fifteen Questions Interview with UMAN

Elixir of Life

Name: UMAN

Members: Danielle Jean, Didier Jean

Occupation: Songwriters, producers

Nationality: French

Current release: UMAN's Chaleur Humaine, a re-release of their 1992 debut album, is out September 17 via [Freedom To Spend](#).

Recommendations:

Didier: A film by Albert Dupontel, "Adieu les cons". "Deux jours, une nuit" a film by the Dardenne brothers, with Marion Cotillard. A song from the band Sigur Ross to breathe.

Danielle: My choice will be the one of today but it could be completely different tomorrow. I am currently rereading "La vie devant soi" by Romain Gary, I love this author, I'm going to sound a bit pretentious but I find that he expresses all my thoughts with talent and a poignant humor.

Otherwise, in terms of cinema, I could recommend two films that have marked me: "Holly motors" by Leos Carax and "Under the skin" by Jonathan Glazer

If you enjoyed this interview with UMAN, their [original website](#) is still online.

When did you start writing/producing music - and what or who were your early passions and influences? What was it about music and/or sound that drew you to it?

Didier: As you know, we were immersed in Mozart's melodies, Beethoven's metronomic tempi and later, we dived into the Beatles. Irresistible. As a teenager Alain Chamfort made us soar, then Pink Floyd, Genesis, Magma touched a very sensitive chord, and finally jazz-fusion (Weather Report for example) which was for me the foundation of my desire to be a composer. First as a bass player. I immediately liked this complicity with the drummer, the life impulse which emerges from it, and the heart which capsizes on a line of bass which intermingles with the guitar ...

Danielle: We worked to buy material and little by little we recorded people to be able to continue to build our studio. We were lucky enough to arrive at the time of the beginning of the homestudios. Our first influences were the classical music that our parents listened to religiously but also the French song (for example Charles Trenet) that the whole family sang in the car. Then, we each made our own experiences ...

For most artists, originality is preceded by a phase of learning and, often, emulating others. What was this like for you: How would you describe your own development as an artist and the transition towards your own voice?

Didier: The artist is a sponge, as I told you we had very diverse influences and our roots grew in this soil. And then one day, we launch ourselves on the wire, in balance, we progress, sometimes of course we fall but we get up again at once because it is Music which occupies all our spirit.

Danielle: I only took singing lessons late; you could say that I learned to sing by imitating singers like Véronique Samson. Kate Bush ... Later, I participated in classical choirs and I wanted to take classical singing lessons which disturbed me a lot in the beginning, I was asked to change all my habits, to have a voice sound always the same and that blocked me rather. Then I did workshops of world singing, jazz and I really liked it and I could have fun with my voice and use it as an

instrument.

How do you feel your sense of identity influences your creativity?

Didier: Of course a little bit, I am, we are French but I feel rather a citizen of the world.

Danielle: I don't know if being French influences our music. In any case, even if it is not intended, we have always found ourselves different, always difficult to put in a box and it has rather complicated our lives. But that's how it is.

What were your main creative challenges in the beginning and how have they changed over time?

Didier: I would say that in the beginning I tried to dig a groove of my own and then I just tried not to get stuck in it.

Danielle: At the very beginning, we did songs, maybe because of me; I am very much into formatted songs ;-). And then, we liked contemporary dance shows and naturally, we proposed our music to choreographers who pushed us towards a more refined style.

As creative goals and technical abilities change, so does the need for different tools of expression, be it instruments, software tools or recording equipment. Can you describe this path for you, starting from your first studio/first instrument? What motivated some of the choices you made in terms of instruments/tools/equipment over the years?

Didier: What I liked about my encounter with synths was the diversity of moods I could create in a few hours of work. I had an orchestra (a bit psychedelic) at hand and everything became possible

Have there been technologies or instruments which have profoundly changed or even questioned the way you make music?

Didier: The machines! They made me autonomous. The sequencer that allowed me to organize my ideas quite spontaneously. The polyphony of the keyboards after the monophony of the bass, it changes your life. Its electronic sounds, so exciting. Paradoxically, I also compose a lot on electric piano.

Danielle: Didier was sampling small musical sentences of my voice and that's how the Uman sound was built.

Collaborations can take on many forms. What role do they play in your approach and what are your preferred ways of engaging with other creatives through, for example, file sharing, jamming or just talking about ideas?

Didier: We both enjoy collaborating with other people on a variety of projects. But musically, I collaborate with Danielle the most. Since 500 km separate us, we exchange audio files, although I much prefer to do a live recording session.

Danielle: Uman's biggest collaboration is with Zad, a painter. All the graphics on the albums are by Zad, we are both fans of her work and the fact that her studio is just a stone's throw away from the studio has allowed a real exchange. And then, we had the chance to make real musical meetings with very good musicians: Phil Walter, Daniel Beaussier ...

Take us through a day in your life, from a possible morning routine through to your work, please.

Do you have a fixed schedule? How do music and other aspects of your life feed back into each other - do you separate them or instead try to make them blend seamlessly?

Didier: Ideally I like to start my day with 20 minutes of yoga, followed by a walk. After that I can handle the unbearable. For example, not making music because my job as a writer-publisher sends me on a mission somewhere.

Danielle: At the time of Chaleur humaine we lived in the same house and so if we didn't have any food work, we spent our day on the music. Now, I live in the Paris area and Didier in Corrèze and we work by sharing our files and by discussing. We both have other activities, Didier is an editor and writer, and I am in charge of a school support association and we can't see each other as often as we would like. But we have found a method that works well. And we know each other well.

Can you talk about a breakthrough work, event or performance in your career? Why does it feel special to you? When, why and how did you start working on it, what were some of the motivations and ideas behind it?

Didier: A memory of the Avignon festival where a dance company was playing for which Danielle and I had composed the music. Every evening, many spectators came to congratulate us when the lights came back on. This certainly made us want to go further, like, for example, creating UMAN.

Danielle: "Uman Spirit" was our first hit. We were lucky that Bob Duskis from Windham Hill records liked it and included it in several compilations of the label. For us, that song was the beginning of an Uman adventure.

There are many descriptions of the ideal state of mind for being creative. What is it like for you? What supports this ideal state of mind and what are distractions? Are there strategies to enter into this state more easily?

Didier: Having fun is the key word. We play music. If the piece is good, it means that you had a good time. Alone or accompanied. On the strategy side, some substances are sometimes used like hot chocolate and buttered toast.

Danielle: Ah Ah ... I think that the state of mind conducive to creation is very personal and it depends on each person. For me, it's a balance between having time on my hands but also a certain urgency or I won't get started. It's also a mix of willpower and letting go. And finding inspiration, I think we find it everywhere: in the sensations we feel when we taste a dessert, in a movie, a book, a dance performance, a painting, a walk in the forest or in a museum ... It is true that we are fed by everything. And the problems to reach the right state of mind, are always the same: lack of self-confidence and self-criticism.

Music and sounds can heal, but they can also hurt. Do you personally have experiences with either or both of these? Where do you personally see the biggest need and potential for music as a tool for healing?

Didier: If it weren't for music, I would already be in intensive care due to exhaustion. Music soothes me. It is my elixir of life.

Danielle: Music has not cured me but I am joyful when I sing, especially when I achieve something. I think that the soothing virtues of music are no longer to be proven and indeed, it can

help to find a serene breathing rhythm. In France, we say: music softens the manners.

There is a fine line between cultural exchange and appropriation. What are your thoughts on the limits of copying, using cultural signs and symbols and the cultural/social/gender specificity of art?

Danielle: Indeed, the border is thin and the polemic around cultural appropriation as a logic of domination can be justified. However, artists are inspired by everything that touches them and can then draw inspiration from it without speaking for someone or claiming to be from this or that culture. I agree with Oswaldo de Andrade who invites us to devour all these cultures, black, Indian, European, like at the table of a joyful feast, to create a particular, complex and original culture. Long live crossbreeding!

Didier: To be inspired by other artists is to be open to others, I claim it, even if when I compose, I tend to close the hatches to refocus on ourselves. Otherwise, being copied doesn't bother me at all, I take it as a tribute.

Our sense of hearing shares intriguing connections to other senses. From your experience, what are some of the most inspiring overlaps between different senses - and what do they tell us about the way our senses work?

Didier: I have an anecdote, some musician friends with whom I played a long time ago have continued to improvise together regularly and they have developed a complicity that is like a miracle. Of course, one could say that they have well established plans but I think on the contrary that they have built a way of communication of their own, like a sixth sense that links them.

Danielle: Hearing can indeed awaken other senses. I have a musician friend with whom I worked who makes correspondences between music and sight, notably colors, she always gave me indications like, "a little more red, or orange or blue" and it is true that it spoke to me. And then we often say that we work the color of a piece. And for the song, we often give indications like "warmer, colder, harder, softer ..." so a correspondence with the touch. And all these indications speak to us.

For me, music generates emotions, memories, images and most of the time movements.

Art can be a purpose in its own right, but it can also directly feed back into everyday life, take on a social and political role and lead to more engagement. Can you describe your approach to art and being an artist?

Didier: I don't know if we have a social role as artists. We accompany our time rather. By vibrating in contact with it. We are resonance boxes.

Danielle: We are both socially invested, in a different way. Didier is the editor of a small publishing house that aims to transmit values, and I work with children, young people and families in school and social difficulties. As for me, I don't mix my two activities at all, music is my secret garden but it is obvious that my social activity influences my way of singing.

What can music express about life and death which words alone may not?

Danielle: Music does not activate the same area of the brain as words. And our brains are all different, some areas are more solicited than others. If your language is music, you will be more sensitive to it. And then, there are as many languages as there are musics, that's why some musics go straight to your heart even if they don't touch others, it all depends on your experience.

We can see a piece of music as a life, always succeed the introduction which is the birth, develop then rich and varied parts and especially finish well the piece!

Didier: Do a funeral ceremony without music and you will understand my point of view on the matter.