Adam Wiltzie & Jóhann Jóhannsson
Friendship Survival Guide

Adam Wiltzie (as told to Piotr Orlov)

I am forever being asked to relate some sort of emotional resolution about Jóhann, almost always bittersweet. It's hard enough to make a record, but then to have to find some sort of narrative to explain yourself can feel impossible, especially in this case. So, let's ponder the unanswerable and look at the depths of one's own inner conflicts. After many years of speculation and scattered confessions, this press release attempts at a thread of meaning that I have no wish to break. To honour Jóhann's legacy, to humanise him, to talk about the things he loved, and the things we shared.

Jóhann and I originally connected at the merch table at a Stars of the Lid concert in Prague back in 2007, he was there recording with the Smecky Orchestra. Early on, we established that we were born two days apart, in the second half of September in 1969, and I knew almost right away that I was rhythmically aligned with his character.

You know how when you're young, you're mostly hanging out with kids in your same general age group? (Because the older ones are just gonna beat you up all the time….) It's only later in life that you start hanging out with people of way-different ages, when it ends up being normal. Being born two days apart, Jóhann and I shared this collective experience of life from the beginning. Even though he grew up in Reykjavik, and I was from New York, there were so many stories where we knew exactly what the other was talking about, the same references, music, movies, influences. And we experienced them at the same time. For me, that means a lot.

That first night, we went out and had a drink, just sitting around, talking about everything for hours. It was a first-night-on-Earth-type meeting, two guys who just met but seemed like we'd known each other our entire lives. We grew up in the 1970s and were told that it is not polite to talk about yourself, even in tragic stories. But we talked about these things from our very first meeting, and both our heads kind of exploded. One really big one—and one I share with almost everyone I've met who was born in autumn of 1969—is a story our mothers told us: they remember feeling us kicking inside their stomach in July of that year, as they watched the Apollo 11 moon landing on TV. I've met a few people with a birthday in the last three months of that year. I always ask them this question, and we all have the same exact story.

There was an aesthetic that binded Jóhann and I, especially when it came to creating sounds. A really great orchestral sound is one thing, but so many of the sounds we were drawn to came from these archaic machines. Some of that was just because when we started out making music, we were broke. My four-track tape machine at the dawn of the 1990's cost $300, and that was a fortune for me. But the sounds I was making were warm, fuzzy and inviting—they were glorious, exactly what I needed. You'd play it for people and they'd say, "Wow, this sounds like shit," or "There's a problem, like something's broken." Jóhann was fond of saying that, if for

us, it sounded okay, then this is correct. “It sounds broken to you? That means we're getting somewhere.”

So much between us was unspoken. It was one of the easiest friendships I ever had. I don't want to call him my brother or anything, 'cause I never had a brother, so I wouldn't even know what that means. But our connection was something similar. Later on, we used to talk on the phone all the time. Most people nowadays seem like they never like to answer the phone, but we’d call each other a lot. “Hey man, what are you doing? What's up?”

I played with Jóhann live a lot. I used to run sound for him on tour, and, honestly, we never really had an argument. Before the release of *Fordlandia*, he’d never toured the U.S. and did not have a booking agent, so I booked a tour of the East Coast and Midwest in 2009. I remember not being able to secure a show in Boston, so my local contacts at Brainwashed and I rented the auditorium/ballroom at the Cambridge YMCA, hired a local PA company to do sound, and we put on the show ourselves, selling tickets only at the door. Almost 200 people showed up. I was kind of amazed. I remember we were in Pittsburgh on that tour, playing in the little theater at the Warhol Museum. We loaded in but weren't ready to sound check. So Jóhann and I just went walking around the museum, looking at stuff. He was so happy perusing the gallery after closing hours, and made a reference to an old quote by Tom Waits, something to the extent of “shite art is destroying the quality of our suffering.” He’d never really toured the States, and now he's at the Warhol Museum, just giddy with happiness. It was everything that he had hoped it would be.

In 2013, Jóhann asked me to collaborate on some of the cues for the score *Theory of Everything*. That was the first time we made music together. A lot of his music was pretty straightforward, a traditional classical score. Mostly, he was looking for someone to make chordal shifts on some of his transitions, and some pads, some small ghost-writing. The final music has this atmospheric bed underneath the melancholia—some of that was from my input, he allowed me to interject those elements into the score. At the time he was working out of this little studio in Berlin at the Oranienstrasse compound. (After he won a Golden Globe for that score, I remember thinking, “If the audience could only have seen this tiny hole in which he created this score, they would scream!”) I was a perfect collaborator because I didn’t need to be in his studio, able to record on my own in Belgium. We were just having this back-and-forth, happy with the first takes every time, super-easy and quick. He loved it, and I loved what he was sending back. And because we were friends but lived in different cities, we were always really able to talk in a non-judgmental way. It was very inspiring, and creative.

That work was the catalyst for the idea of recording an album together. Not even halfway through working on *Theory*, Jóhann was like, “Man, we need to make our own weird record.” Some of the first couple of things on *Friendship Survival Guide* come from this time, new drones we started working on. It sparked us. There was definitely a lot of joy in that musical moment. But also, a fine line between happiness and melancholia. I think there's a connection in those feelings, an emotional similarity. And possibly a different [musical] key—or key of a drone—that

can hold multiple feelings. Jóhann and I could kind of fit it all together. He was incredibly productive at the time we were making those sounds, in a good spot.

Then as soon as that happened, Jóhann won a Golden Globe for the *Theory* score, and it was a skyrocket to the moon for him. I was happy for everything that was happening to him. We worked on other stuff together. I was in Budapest when he wrote for the *Sicario* score, though it was more so just friends bouncing ideas off each other. Then I acted as sound-man and played in his live band on his final tour. But it took a while for us to get back in the studio together. It wasn't until his score for *Arrival*, the Denis Villeneuve sci-fi movie score, another one that I worked on with him as a ghost-writer. We did more of our own recordings then.

I wasn't a friend who was trying to hassle him or tell him he needed to get his shit together, or giving him grief. I think he felt like he could just talk to me. So maybe I had access on a friendship-level that a lot of the other people in his circle didn't have. We all failed him in that sense. Yet even with everything that happened, all the way up until right before he died, Jóhann and I were in good communication. When he passed, I was overwhelmed with grief. I talked to him a couple of days before that. He had just played a concert in Barcelona, and was sounding calm and lucid. I was so happy for him because he had a great show. He was like, “Man, I wish we could do more shows like this, because it felt so good to be on stage.” He was having a really good day, he’d just been hired to do the music for the *Christopher Robin* film, and seemed in a really good place. And then he was gone.

The initial recordings for the music on *Friendship Survival Guide* all took place in 2013 and 2017. Then I did all the orchestral stuff later. Some of the analog tape loops—like on the last two pieces, “In Ever Decreasing Circles” and “Where Are You Now, Voyager”—we worked on with our longtime friend and engineer Francesco Donadello, using Jóhann's Revox machines. Those sound exactly like they did all those years ago, just me and him just sitting in the studio together.

There’s a lot of guitars on the album. We did some directly, but a lot that ended up on the record were actually recorded with Steve Albini in Chicago, about five months before he passed. I was spending time there, visiting my mother and my aunt during the holidays, and thought it would be nice if I could have a bit of time to do something creative. I called up Steve and he had the day after Christmas available at Electrical Audio. Some of the guitars had already been recorded, so I was just blasting and amping them, and letting Steve make it sound the way he does. And though this doesn't sound like a Steve Albini record, he's a big part of how that guitar texture turned out.

Though finishing the album took many years. I didn’t have a problem listening to this music. I have a really close connection with it. At the same time, it's taken me a long time to get it together and finish this work. After Jóhann’s passing, it was difficult to come to grips with working on it. Sometimes you have this thing in your head. It just required the initial step of, “I gotta wake up tomorrow and do that,” daunting from a distance. But once I got back into these pieces, they all fit like a glove. I started back on it before the end of 2023, and I finished it in

October 2025. So it took about a year and a half to gather all the pieces we had, create the new orchestrated stuff, and work on little bits and bobs, violin and viola hoppity stuff with Bryan Senti. The first couple weeks, I was feeling the weight of the project a little bit. But once I got on a roll, it all just worked and turned out great. It happened slowly, and then all of a sudden it was done.

All the titles on *Friendship Survival Guide* have hidden meanings. They're all fragments of our memories, or half-remembered stories. They function as a private language between the collaborators. It's minimal music that can easily become purely formal or conceptual, so the titles anchor the sound in our recognizable friendship of human experience.

The first single, "White Gloves and Turtlenecks" is my take on a giant fragment of memory of Jóhann. He was this DIY, plug-in-the-guitar-with-distortion-pedal guy who came from a punk rock background, and was in a shoegaze/Jesus and Mary Chain-type band called Daisy Hill Puppy Farm. But he got thrown into a stuffy composer world, and kind of hated it. Yet he loved all kinds of music, and was really torn about the people that he was being lined up against. So that title is a tongue-in-cheek, long-distance dedication from Jóhann to the culture he had to exist in. "Mourners Will be Outcast" is actually a quote from Oscar Wilde, whom Jóhann loved. "Exceptional Proportions" is a little bit outside of the realm of Jóhann. It was a piece that we had, which I needed help with, to create an ending. So Tim Hecker got involved. Tim knew Jóhann, they loved each other's work, and had collaborated a little bit. I've known Tim for a long time, and was fortunate enough to have him in my studio. We regurgitated some stuff and created this weird little "Exceptional Proportions" moment, so that's actually a dedication to Tim.

When you're a creative person, you're making all these things and putting 'em out into the world, and you never know the importance of a piece of work you've created until you release it and see how it resonates with people. Sometimes you just make a record. You're inspired, you wrote and recorded some songs. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Or maybe it's "The bus driver ran over my mom and that's how I created these songs." It's not always that dramatic. Sometimes it's just, "I've built a new studio and I feel good, so I wrote some new music." It doesn't really mean anything until you put it out into the world, where it acquires meaning because of how people hear it. Think about *Dark Side of the Moon*, for example. It was an inspired time, Pink Floyd was a great band, and had this incredible moment. Does it really mean anything? I'm not so sure. It was just a great album. That's also possible, right?

The narrative of *Friendship Survival Guide* is a little bit more important, because the person that made many of these sounds is not with us anymore. Maybe at this point Jóhann is my version of Syd Barrett. I guess our friendship is the story here, that one half of the duo is not around anymore, that he was a good friend of mine, and I'm still dealing with his loss. At the same time, it feels great to be finishing this music. Because you can feel Jóhann's presence. It's this living, breathing thing for me, a beautiful reminder. The quintessentially most perfect and beautiful thing about collaboration is that it's something you could never do by yourself. It's as simple as that. Jóhann's not there anymore, but this artifact we created together, is alive and it's incredible. I could never have done it without him.

But there is no cure for grief. I reached this point in life where I'm making albums with dead people, which is a little bit strange. Over the past 15 years I have lost three close friends and musical collaborators, Jóhann, Brian McBride, my partner in Stars of the Lid, and Mark Linkous from Sparklehorse. You spend hundreds of days of your life driving around in a van, as if there will never be a moment where they aren’t gonna be sitting next to you, then suddenly they *vanish*. That's the thing I miss the most. After all these years, all the dark twists and turns in life, somehow I'm the one that ended up being left here. It's still not real that they're not. I don't know if it ever will be.