

AARON AND ALEX CRAIG

Born in Dallas, Texas, Aaron and Alex Craig began shooting movies on their parents' VHS camera before they reached their teens, later setting up production company We Are Films in New York, and working with artists including Sufjan Stevens, My Brightest Diamond and The Welcome Wagon. They have produced commercials, documentaries and music videos, and are currently shooting two feature films across 2015 and 2016.

YARN/WIRE

Pianists Laura Barger and Ning Yu and percussionists Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg founded piano/percussion quartet Yarn/Wire in 2005, while graduate students at New York's Stony Brook University. Their vision has been to expand and solidify the repertoire of music for two pianists and two percussionists, taking Bartók's seminal 1937 Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion as well as works by Luciano Berio and George Crumb as their starting points. They released their first CD, *Tone Builders*, in 2010, featuring specially commissioned music by young US composers, and they have held residences at universities across America, including Princeton and Stanford.



HUB SESSIONS



ROUND-UP

Saturday 29 August 10.00pm | The Hub

The performance lasts approximately 1 hour 20 minutes with no interval

ROUND-UP

MUSIC BY **SUFJAN STEVENS**
PERFORMED BY **YARN/WIRE**

COMMISSIONED BY **BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC**

Faith and spirituality, time and geography, love and autobiography: all intertwine in the eclectic, deeply individual music of US singer-songwriter, composer and multi-instrumentalist Sufjan Stevens, one of the most distinctive musicians working today.

He has created vivid musical/historical portraits of two American states in the albums *Michigan and Illinois*, part of a projected 50-CD cycle covering all 50 US states (which he later unapologetically admitted was 'a promotional gimmick'.) He put together a very personal take on industrial electronica in the visionary album *The Age of Adz*, inspired by outsider artist Royal Robertson, and he created an album of lo-fi, spiritually tinged folk songs in *Seven Swans*. He even released two boxed sets of Christmas music, from the twee to the achingly beautiful, originally recorded as gifts for his family and friends.

Sliding between hypnotic Reich-like soundscapes, lush orchestrations, propulsive electronica and the distinctive twang of a banjo, Stevens creates art-pop anthems full of disarmingly catchy melodies, yet epic in their emotional impact. His most recent album, *Carrie & Lowell* (named after his mother and step-father) is his most personal project to date, a set of raw recollections of his early life and sometimes harrowing reflections on his strained relationship with his mother.

Stevens was commissioned in 2007 by New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music to put together the music and film work *The BQE*, which he describes as 'a symphonic and cinematic exploration of New York City's Brooklyn-Queens Expressway', featuring footage shot by Stevens alongside music for his band and orchestra – as well as a trio of live hula-hoopers, the Hooper Heroes. In 2012, he collaborated with fellow Brooklyn musicians Nico Muhly and Bryce Dessner on the celestial-themed theatrical song cycle *Planetarium*, which they performed in Australia, the UK, France, the Netherlands and New York.

Stevens describes his most recent music and film work *Round-Up*, which you'll hear and see tonight (and which was also commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music), as a companion piece to *The BQE*. But whereas that earlier work was an investigation of modern industry and urban living on America's east coast, *Round-Up* travels to the other side of the country, and focuses instead on man immersed in nature, and an event based squarely in US agricultural society. Co-created by Stevens and film-makers Aaron and Alex Craig, *Round-Up* is a 75-minute portrait in image and music of one of the world's largest rodeos, the Pendleton Round-Up.

Stevens first discovered the Round-Up in 2012 through a newspaper ad while travelling in north-west America, making a special trip to the small town of Pendleton in northern Oregon to experience the century-old gathering at first hand. He was fascinated: as an urban artist, raised in Detroit and now based in New York, he felt like an outsider in the rodeo's world of rural tradition, but he nevertheless felt compelled to make sense of its rituals and aesthetics. He had previously worked with film-maker brothers Aaron and Alex Craig on the acclaimed single-take video for his seasonal song 'I'll Be Home for Christmas', and he emailed them with the idea of collaborating on a film of the Round-Up. The following year, the Craig brothers travelled to Pendleton themselves with the idea of making a five-minute short, but ended up with more than 60 hours of footage, later edited down to the film's final 75 minutes.

The intention, the Craig brothers say, is to get the viewer as close as possible to the rodeo action, and to make you feel like you're really there – they shot the film's footage of bull-riding, barrell-racing, calf-roping, parades and more from frighteningly close to the action, often having to leap out of the way of stampeding bulls and horses. But their final slow-motion, meditative images (shot at 300 frames per second) are a world away from the frenetic speed of real rodeo.

Likewise, in his music – which he wrote for New York-based piano and percussion quartet Yarn/Wire – Stevens consciously avoids any reference to old-time Americana. There are no steel guitars, no campfire songs, no rodeo ballads – in fact, no singing at all. Instead, he based his restrained, ruminative soundtrack around repeating, shifting patterns across the pianos and percussion, the work's sections reflecting the rodeo's different activities yet contrasting provocatively with the cowboy aesthetic of the Craig brothers' images. Together, the three men treat rodeo as a modern-day ritual, reinventing it as a metaphor for man's relationship with the planet. Even the hula-ing Hooper Heroes of *The BQE* make a reappearance – an entirely natural addition to Stevens and the Craig brothers' striking reappraisal of a time-honoured American institution.

© **David Kettle** is a freelance writer and editor