

Keeping Rhythm, and Hanging It in a Gallery

Drummers from bands like Guns N' Roses and the Red Hot Chili Peppers are using new technology to turn their performances into visual art. All it takes is a few open-shutter cameras, some colorful lights and a killer beat.

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Ravi Dosaj of SceneFour hanging prints in the company's office. Clockwise from top left: "The Bat" by Steve Smith, "Choreography of Sound" by Steve Smith, "Solidarity" by Bill Ward, "The Ocean" by Frankie Banali, "Phantom Vapor" by Chad Sexton and "Round-A-Bounce" by Chad Sexton. Emily Berl for The New York Times

By Janet Morrissey
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Avid music fans are always looking for ways to connect with their favorite artist. Some follow a band from city to city during concert tours; others obsess over every record, bootleg recording, Facebook post and Instagram photo they can find of a musician's performance.

Now a growing number of fans are discovering and collecting "rhythm-on-canvas" art, where drummers from some big-name bands — like Guns N' Roses and the Red Hot Chili Peppers — use LED technology to transfer their unique style and rhythm of drumming onto a canvas. [SceneFour](#), a Los Angeles design and branding firm, started making them in 2011. They're part of a [growing movement to use technology](#) to turn nonvisual media into visual art.

The art provides a "musical fingerprint" that is as unique as an artist's autograph.

"Each artist has their own persona, their own way of moving, their own physical stature and their own energy, so all these come into play," said Cindy Blackman Santana, a jazz artist who was also a touring drummer for Lenny Kravitz and Santana, and one of the drummers captured by SceneFour.

So, how is it created? The drummer sits in a pitch-black studio and uses LED-lit drumsticks that illuminate in a variety of ways, depending on the rhythm, speed, force and angle of the sticks as they hit the drumhead. The musician uses an assortment of lit drumsticks — similar to the way a painter would use brushes with oil — to create a visual reflection of the performance.



Mario Duplantier, drummer for the death metal band Gojira, creating the work "Vers le Cosmos." via SceneFour

Open-shutter cameras track the performance in increments. Photos of the abstract light are then transferred to a computer and then to a canvas using Giclee printers, which create high-quality prints. The pieces are named, signed by the musician and sold as limited edition works, with around five to 100 numbered prints per run. Some of the artists also develop one-of-a-kind works.

"Each guy's artwork looks drastically different because their styles and techniques are different," said Cory Danziger, who co-founded SceneFour in 2004 with Ravi Dosaj, a graphic designer.

"Bill Ward's artwork is dark and there's kind of a foreboding element to it, whereas Chad Smith's has kind of a light and airy feel to his playing. His arms are open and those pieces have a butterfly effect," Mr. Danziger said. Mr. Ward is Black Sabbath's drummer and Mr. Smith plays for the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Steven Adler, the original drummer and founding member of Guns N' Roses, likes the way the art captures his style and personality.

"It's a musical fingerprint," he says. "It shows the emotion and the passion of me putting out my energy, my love, my excitement, my joy and my anger — it all comes out in that picture."

And the works have resonated with fans.

Tom Wallace, a 55-year-old San Diego resident, has been a Black Sabbath fan since the early 1970s. After reading a Facebook post about Mr. Ward's art, he immediately purchased four pieces and signed up for notifications for future releases. He has since attended six of SceneFour's gallery shows in Los Angeles, where he met Mr. Ward and even started purchasing other drummers' artwork.

He now owns 45 rhythm-on-canvas prints, and hangs 26 of them in his two-story, four-bedroom house — even on the ceilings. He rotates the art on display, like a museum does.

SceneFour's rhythmic-art business started in 2011, and it has flourished largely through word of mouth in the music and gallery communities. The company now focuses solely on these art

This year, SceneFour is creating rhythm-on-canvas prints for 11 musicians, compared with two musicians in 2011. It is also expecting to sell 1,200 pieces this year, up from 363 the first year. The company is expanding its service to capture a guitarist's performance using a proprietary LED-tipped glove.

Prices range from \$200 to \$2,000 for the limited-edition prints, and between \$700 and \$20,000 for the one-of-a-kind pieces shown at galleries. SceneFour and the musicians split the proceeds, after expenses, 50-50.

The SceneFour co-founders said they bootstrapped the company with no outside investors, no marketing budget and only two full-time and three part-time employees. Now, Mr. Danziger is hoping to take on investors in order to expand and aggressively market it.

"We have so many artists we'd like to work with and that would like to release collections with us," he said.

Mr. Danziger came up with the idea for the rhythmic art while attending a rock concert by the band Living Colour in Los Angeles in 2009. He watched Will Calhoun, the band's drummer, pull out a pair of LED-lit drumsticks, and he was fascinated by the streaks of neon-colored lights that cascaded the stage, tracking every move and beat of the drummer.

"He was making shapes and visual patterns that were mesmerizing, and I thought, 'How can we capture that and make fine art pieces from the rhythm?'" Mr. Danziger said.

The next day, he purchased LED-lit drumsticks, several open shutter cameras, computer and SD cards, rented a studio and began testing the concept. By 2011, the first two art releases were made, with Stephen Perkins of Jane's Addiction and Matt Sorum of Guns N' Roses and Velvet Revolver.

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Ravi Dosaj, left, and Cory Danziger, co-founders of SceneFour, have been working with musicians to make rhythm-on-canvas art since 2011. Emily Berl for The New York Times

There have been a few hiccups along the way. Sometimes, drummers pound a little harder than the LED sticks can handle during the recording sessions.

“Frankie Banali from Quiet Riot broke every single stick we had — he probably broke 30 pairs of sticks,” Mr. Danziger said with a laugh.

It did not take much coaxing to get drummers on board; many saw it as a natural extension of their music.

“I like the idea of sound and vision being captured in that sort of way,” said Mr. Smith of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who has done 13 visuals. He is planning some one-of-a-kind pieces, looking to add unusual embellishments to the art — like making it a lenticular art piece, or even adding his DNA to the canvas.

“Maybe add some saliva, maybe some blood — or maybe some other DNA — you never know,” Mr. Smith said. “I’m going to get really artsy.”

People purchase the art through the company’s website and at gallery shows, which SceneFour hosts several times a year.

Some drummers, like Mr. Calhoun of Living Colour, host their own gallery shows where they play drums and answer questions.

“I wanted to bring another kind of aesthetic to the art world,” he said. “I wanted to perform my art.”



SceneFour's closest rival is the [Soundwaves Art Foundation](#), which has produced music art for more than 180 musicians over the past 12 years. Its art is signed by the musicians, like SceneFour's are. But that's where the similarities end. Soundwaves uses audio waves from recorded songs — not the motions and live performance of a musician — to create the art. Soundwaves is also a nonprofit that donates 50 percent of its net sales to charity.

Is SceneFour creating art that will appreciate over time?

Darren Julien, the president and chief executive of Julien's Auctions, an auction house that specializes in entertainment- and pop-culture-related works, said he believes that SceneFour's works are collectible. “The key is doing a limited number of prints and not overpopulating the market,” he said.

He said that sales and valuations for SceneFour works would be similar to those of Soundwaves. In 2011, an auction he hosted for Soundwaves far exceeded expected bids. A [signed Paul McCartney “Band on the Run” piece](#), which was expected to fetch between \$1,500 and \$3,000, sold for \$11,520.

So, who would Mr. Julien like to see most from SceneFour? “The Holy Grail of drummers,” he said, “would be Ringo Starr.”
