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Seventeen composers primed to take their place on the A-list

Compiled by Jeff Bond
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We talked to some of the most promising composers in and around Hollywood and asked them what got them excited about film music in the first place, what they've learned from their mentors and the kind of working experiences that can only happen in this business. Lesson learned: It helps to have seen "Star Wars" as a kid.

Nico Muhly

Credits: "Joshua," "The Reader," "Felicitas"

At a certain point in the mid-'80s, some theater in Boston was showing "Lawrence of Arabia," and my father took me to see it and I just remember that being the most mind-blowing musical experience. I think of that score a lot, about how it's so romantic. The general consensus now for a score like that, where it's taking place in another land, is that you'd never be so outrageously "oriental." There's something so ridiculous about it that I just adore.

I was working with Philip Glass on "The Hours" and I was supervising the final recording sessions while Philip was away, and there was a big scene where Nicole Kidman was going to walk into this river and kill herself, and there was this enormous anxiety about whether the music was doing the right thing. I was left at the helm of this one traumatic three bars of music, and I got the best phone message ever from Stephen Daldry, the director, which was: "Darling, can the harp ask if she's going to die?" That was the most efficient expression of what the music needed to do.

Mark Kilian

Credits: "Rendition," "Traitor"

Seeing "Star Wars" for the first time in South Africa was as massive as I'm sure it was here in the U.S., and I went to see it a number of times. I bought the record, and I had to buy another record in about a year because I'd worn the first one through.

I was working on a film called "Blind Horizon" and we were looking for a unique voice to be the voice of the movie, and I was jogging down Venice beach one day and I heard this weird, awesome-sounding voice. I traced it to this very large woman, wheelchair-bound, singing, and she was a street person, almost. She eventually wound up singing on the movie and also on my first album. She was very pleased to be involved on that and she had done a little singing up in San Francisco, but she'd never spent much time in the studio. We did an improvised session to record all of her and then we built the score around that, so she didn't have any idea what it was going to sound like. We called her up -- and she had died during the few weeks that we were wrapping up the score. She'd had a heart attack and passed away. There's just something magical about that whole experience.

Clint Shorter

Credits: "Normal," "Spoon," "District 9"

I had an instrumental rock experimental band, and one night we were jamming and a friend of mine put on the Mark Isham "Never Cry Wolf" score. This was the first synth-based score I'd heard and I was drawn in immediately. At the time, I was naive and thought he was just writing whatever he wanted with no form and didn't realize the movie was dictating what he was writing, but that was the jumping-off point for me.

I got a call from a director friend of mine and he asked me if I would score an infomercial for him. He said it was for an herbal supplement and that the whole show was going to be a tongue-in-cheek poke at infomercials. He asked me to write a piece of music for on-set playback and he said he wanted it to sound like '70s adult entertainment music. When I asked him what on Earth this herbal supplement was he said it was a male virility pill. When I got the locked cut of the show, I then realized it was not a virility pill, it was a male "enhancement" pill. In the end the show aired only for a week as the company was sued because -- guess what? -- it didn't work.

Paul Cantelon

Credits: "Everything Is Illuminated," "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," "The Other Boleyn Girl"

My father was a wild banjo player and a faith healer, so during my childhood there was constant music. I would play for (him) during his healing meetings, which were quite out there, intense and all over the place. When he would speak, I used to accompany him. While playing, when he was doing these long monologues, I got a sense for the attraction of accompanying a voice.

If you're of a retiring nature, like I've always been, it's challenging that you work with these larger-than-life, sort of Henry VIII characters, which many directors are. When I look back at my last film, "W" with Oliver Stone, working closely with this amazing character who's like Bukowskian ... the journals I kept from his notes alone read like some wonderful Celine unpublished chronicle.

Andrew Hollander

Credits: "Waitress," "Weather Girl," "Labor Pains"

The impact of the music in "Star Wars" after seeing it -- how many times? -- was huge, but the thing that really ultimately inspired me was "Cinema Paradiso." I was already a musician at that point, but when I saw that movie I was really like "Oh my God!" You really see the impact that music has on a film and I really got into (Ennio) Morricone's stuff after that.

The first film I ever did, one of the great things about it was (that) the director, Brooks Elms, was just a great



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collaborator. But because it was an independent film, it wasn't like a lot of films I'd seen, so I didn't feel like I had a template to go on. It was unique (compared) to what I'd been exposed to and that was really challenging. Once I figured that out, and we figured out where themes would go, I had a really great time. You need to be very confident in your artistic beliefs and feelings about a film and you need to speak your mind, but you need to be open to the fact that a director could say "Cool, but what about this?" And you have to be able to take that in. It doesn't mean they're always right or you're always right, but you have to be open to where the people you're collaborating with and the film take you.

Rob Simonsen

Credits: "(500) Days of Summer," "Dollhouse," "Born That Way"

One of my first memories was seeing "Star Wars" in a drive-in movie theater (and) the moment where Luke turns the blue lightsaber on. That music really blew me away and that's what got me into film music.

I was in Oregon when I did my first film and it was going to be a short that I was making with my friend, and we decided to make it into a feature. There was no dialogue, and so I wrote about an hour and a half of music. But I scored it two or three times over, because the picture changed so massively and the process took about a year. So I'd score it, and we'd sit with it and make all these changes and I'd retool everything, and when there's no dialogue the music was very accurately hitting a lot of moments to tell the story. Then, on the third edit, the director just shaved a few seconds off every shot in the entire film. I ended up getting the score done and the performances were good but the hit points were off, so the next several months I spent in the studio editing the beginning and the end off almost every note played.

Joby Talbot

Credits: "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," "Son of Rambow," "Psychoville"

I remember seeing this Disney documentary where they talked about the music for their cartoons and had Mickey Mouse in a storm at sea and showed how all the instruments contributed to the score. I thought that was pretty cool, but I suppose for people of my age it was probably "Star Wars" that got me completely hooked on film music. The first thing I had to do was a comedy for the BBC called "League of Gentlemen" and I was just lucky it became a success in England. This was the very tail end of the days when as a composer all you had to do was play the theme for the director and producer and they'd say "Yeah, that's nice" and leave you alone to get on and do it. That was 1998 and I didn't even own a computer, so I had to do it with a pencil and paper and a stopwatch and calculator. I didn't really know what I was doing, so there were times I'd be up at 3 o'clock in the morning, having left a zero off my calculations, so something that needed to last 120 seconds actually lasted 12 seconds.

Austin Wintory

Credits: "Captain Abu Raed," "Grace," "Knuckle Draggers"

I started piano lessons on a whim when I was 10 years old, growing up in Denver, and I had no real musical exposure prior to that. My piano teacher was a jazz guy and he asked me what kind of music I wanted to learn and I said, "I didn't know," so he said, "Well, let me play you my favorite music," and he got out three LPs: All three Jerry Goldsmith scores: "A Patch of Blue," "Patton" and "Papillon." It took him bringing me these Goldsmith albums to realize that people do that for a living, so from the age of 10 I thought, "That's clearly the most awesome thing I've ever heard. I really need to do that for a living."

I did this Jordanian film called "Captain Abu Raed," and that was an opportunity for me to write a score that was in many ways very conventional -- an orchestral, romantic, string-heavy score, but in the context of a very quiet, slow-moving Arabic speaking film. In interviews people kept asking why this movie didn't have Arabic music -- it's completely in Arabic, shot in Jordan, everything about it is Arabic. But the director and I came to the conclusion that since it's so cliched for Western films to have that quasi-Arabic score, let's have a Western score in an Arabic film.

Jonathan Sadoff

Credits: "Good Time Max," "The Merry Gentleman," "Tug"

"Jurassic Park" was the first soundtrack album I bought and I could sing that melody anywhere. I always had a thing where I could go to a movie and come out singing the theme to it and those melodies to me were as catchy as anything on the radio.

I found it funny that the first two films I scored were directed by great, really well known actors, and for some reason I continue to get calls from actors who want to direct movies. The first film I scored was James Franco's directorial debut (2007's "Good Time Max") and the second film I scored was Michael Keaton's directorial debut (2008's "The Merry Gentleman"). The first year I went to the Tribeca Film Festival with James and we were on the red carpet and it was really fun and the second year I went to Sundance with Michael and we did the red carpet and we did press and I thought, "Wow, this is great!" Then other films I've been on you realize "You're the composer, dude -- you're not in the movie."

Christopher Gordon

Credits: "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World," "Daybreakers," "Mao's Last Dance"

A really big moment for me was hearing music from "Scott of the Antarctic" by Vaughan Williams. That really piqued my interest in film, and I used to duck off to the cinema all the time to watch movies and that really raised my awareness of what film music can do.

I don't think there's an Australian style of music but there is an Australian sense of what's going too far and what's pushing buttons. We're much more held back than people in Hollywood, we don't like to push buttons and we're more about staying in the background.

I had a very interesting experience with the oddness of "Master and Commander," working on that score. There were three of us who worked on a concert commission together called "The Ghost of Time," and the strange thing was I never met one of the composers until after we were finished. (Director) Peter Weir hears that and really likes it and wants to put exactly the same team together, so we're suddenly planted in Los Angeles for a length of time doing the score for a major movie and we'd never really worked together before.

Angelo Milli

Credits: "Seven Pounds," "Scandal," "Anton Chekhov's The Duel"

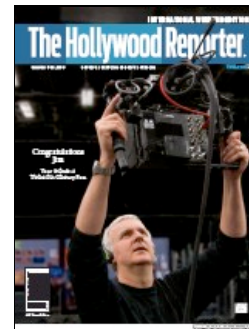
When I was 18, I fell in love with film music. I remember the movie that got me into it was "Beauty and the Beast," the Walt Disney film. I was watching it with my sister and it was the first time I was picking up on the hits and what the composer was doing to make the music come alive with emotion.

My first feature film was "Secuestro express," a Venezuelan movie and one of the things we talked about early on in the project was to find a way to mix contemporary Hollywood film scoring and mix it with the ethnic drums of Venezuela, which hadn't been exported anywhere -- you rarely find recordings of them. In order to do that it was very tough. I had to travel to a specific region in Venezuela and record some of that, buy some of the drums and take them home to my studio and work on those patterns, then mix it with the orchestra which turned out to be a very hard job for me. Ever since then I've tried to bring something from the region into each score I do.

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Henry Jackman

Credits: "Monsters vs. Aliens," "Gulliver's Travels"

My father was an orchestral arranger and I was about 4 or 5 when (he) took me to a performance of Benjamin Britten's "Noye's fludde." I couldn't believe how good it was and there was some hymn that I memorized and learned on piano. It was very dramatic, really powerful, and if you're a 5-year-old kid in some church in Norfolk with a 40-piece choice it's a pretty big deal.

I was doing my own interpretation of Bjork's album "Homogenic," and it ended up being half live orchestra and half Bjork-esque, half Marius DeVries-y production. Hans Zimmer heard it and said "What the hell are you doing? You should be doing film music, you idiot!" He asked if I wanted to work with him on something and I thought it would maybe I could work with him on some small movie and he said "Yeah -- it's called 'The Da Vinci Code.'" The first thing I remember about Hans was sitting down to talk about "Da Vinci" and I thought we'd be talking about music. He sort of went "Ah, details, details -- notes are optional, we can talk about that later. The important thing is the story." So my brain had to do this huge transfer. If you're worrying about the structure of some sonority, that's one thing; but with this, no matter what sort of nonsense you're doing musically, the story is the most important thing and you have to be certain that everything you're doing is in service to the picture.

Bear McCreary

Credits: "Battlestar Galactica," "Eureka," "Caprica"

I saw "Back to the Future" when I was a kid. Alan Silvestri's score really blew me away, and I also saw "Heavy Metal" when I was a kid and despite all the songs in the movie it was Elmer Bernstein's score, the sweeping symphonic score, that really stood out for me.

I got an e-mail from a soldier in Afghanistan and he said one of his friends had been killed in action and as a tribute to him they played a piece of music from one of the "Galactica" soundtrack albums I'd done. It really shook me to my core that the music I'd written with the safety net of knowing it was fiction and was played over a funeral onscreen, that piece of music had been used in a war zone to play for someone's buddy that had been killed. That really blew my mind. As composers, we're just providing scores for television ostensibly, but we still have the opportunity to create something that really means something to people all over the world.

Andrew Lockington

Credits: "Journey to the Center of the Earth," "City of Ember," "Frankie and Alice"

The first movie I remember going to is "Star Wars" and the emotional impact that film music could have and how it affected me from that early time really stuck with me. It was the most significant music to me in the sense that it made me feel happy or sad or excited and just conveyed all those emotions to me in a very powerful way. When you're sitting there trying to come up with a theme and you know you have to write reel one in the first five days and reel two in the next five, you really have no idea how long it's going to take to come up with this idea. It's really not an option to not finish in time, so you don't mull over the possibility. I have people who ask me at the end of the day, "Do you ever have regrets? Do you ever wish you could go back and do something over?" And I have to say no. And that's one reason I have these late nights: I don't want to be on the scoring stage with the London Symphony at Abbey Road and have let one tiny thing go. That's why I go to bed at night and I get up 45 minutes later and go back to work.

Deborah Lurie

Credits: "An Unfinished Life," "The Betrayed," "9"

I have been extremely fortunate to be able to consider Danny Elfman as very much a mentor. I've learned about work ethic from Danny. To see how hard he works was very inspiring and kind of eye-opening for me. I've managed to make a few extra bucks over the years with vocals, whenever they want a crazy, creepy child for a horror film, singing a nursery rhyme or something. I've probably done close to 10 of those now and it's kind of an iconic thing for horror films where there's some weird child singing a lullaby. I've managed to create a niche for myself doing those vocals for some crazy demented child. I consider myself a terrible singer, but apparently I have the ability to sound young and creepy. I used to work with John Ottman, who has done a lot of very creepy film scores and we were good friends so he would have me come over and sing demos so he could mock up cues for directors and suddenly the mockups started becoming the final products.

Christopher Lennertz

Credits: "Disaster Movie," "Adam," "The Open Road"

I spent all my summers in Boston so I distinctly remember probably 1980, 1981 being on a picnic blanket at the Boston Pops hearing the "Star Wars" fanfare start with John Williams conducting. I probably went four or five times a summer all the way into high school so I probably saw John Williams conduct the Pops 30 or 40 times. I remember the white jacket and the whole thing and the only thing I knew about movies or music at that point was that, so that certainly started me down the path.

Elmer Bernstein was my teacher at USC and he sat down with me privately and we went out to dinner one night because I was scoring a comedy for a film student. They wanted it scored like an Elmer score. Basil Poledouris and I worked with for four years and he was my mentor after school. The thing I learned from Elmer is we spotted "The Age of Innocence" together before he even started writing, and he was adamant about the placement of music -- where it goes and doesn't go -- and the entrances and exits and how they can change the pace of a film. Basil was a film student at USC and the one thing he hit home with me was that as a film composer you're more of a collaborator in the process than you are a musician.

Nick Urata

Credits: "Lie to Me," "I Love You Philip Morris"

On the first film I worked on I was put together with Michael Danna on "Little Miss Sunshine," and he had done 50 films or something and this was my first film with my band and he shepherded us through the process. The most recent one I did I hung out with John Powell and he gave me a master class in life and music and really helped sharpen my composing chops. From both those guys I just learned basic rules like don't distract the audience and never be ahead of the audience.

On one of my very first films, there was a big scene and my first 3 or 4 attempts had failed miserably. I could feel that everyone was starting to wonder if I was the right guy for the job. I worked nonstop and hired a 20-piece orchestra to record my final attempt. The day of the director's approval, about 8 people crammed into my little studio. Producers, executive producers, editors, you name it, as if I wasn't already scared enough. They were all sitting behind me as I started the playback. My heart sank with the first note. I realized I had put the wrong music into the scene. Somehow I had put an unmixed, unfinished demo in place of an orchestra. I kind of froze. There was nothing I could do, so I just let it play and worked the faders as best I could. It was the longest two minutes of my life, it sounded so awful to me. I visualized leaving town and explaining to everyone why I got fired.

When it was finally over I turned around and the director was standing right behind me. He pulled me out of my chair and hugged me, there was actual applause and hi fives. It could have been divine intervention, or blind luck, I don't

know, but In the end, my extremely stupid mistake saved the scene, my job, and made into the film.



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