

A Moment Behind the Scenes with Composer Chris Porter

CHRIS PORTER: Hello, this is Chris Porter, creator of *SOLAR*. If you've listened through the show's credits, you might have noticed that I composed all of the music for the show as well. On the behind the scenes excerpt for this week, I spoke with Jenny Curtis, director and producer and voice of ALI and executive producer Bill Curtis to discuss the process behind scoring *SOLAR*. Here, the three of us are discussing the four note main title theme and the significant hidden meaning behind it.

JENNY CURTIS: The theme is incredibly powerful and it's four notes.

CHRIS PORTER: I've said this before, but in the writing of it, in the conception of it, the sun is a force to be reckoned with, and it was definitely not to spoil anything, I made a ground rule from the get go that no one is ever allowed to control the sun. They can fight to use its power. That could be a thing. But no one gets to say, Oh, I'm just going to take the sun's core. Like, No, the sun is an entity that we have to cope with. So in the music, I wanted there to be that same sense of neither good nor bad, just something massive and unfathomable. So as a result, the main four notes are A-E-G-F, which is not technically in major or minor. It's literally just four notes in a modal sentence. And I can make it sound major or minor if I had it in the C or C-sharp. The theme itself is just those four notes, and it exists kind of outside of any sort of modal rationale that we would need to think about. And in the scoring of it, I just wanted it to keep repeating and just get bigger and bigger with the bass getting louder and louder until it just cut off and drifted out into space, which was as much as I thought about in the composing. And a lot of that came through in the orchestration of it where I was like, oh no, this is the sound that I'm hearing and this is the distortion that I'm hearing on it and this is the feeling of it spiralling out into nothingness. And that's where that came from.

JENNY CURTIS: How long did the theme take you?

CHRIS PORTER Well, it's not like a continuous like I sat down and was like, we're going to do this today. I would go over to my piano to do something and I'd be like, I want this combination of notes. And I knew I wanted to be simple. I didn't know it's going to be four notes, but I was like, I just need something simple. And I would just try some stuff and I'd be like, I'm not really hearing that. And then I'd go shower and then I'd come back and try a couple more notes. So it wasn't like four days of intensive labor, but it definitely took about four days until I found that combination of notes. And then I was like, we're going to sit with that for a while. After a few days I came back and I was like, I think that's it. That feels really good to me. We're going to go with that.

JENNY CURTIS: I want to talk about all of the various ways you think of these themes and how you come to them. But I especially, my absolute favorite cue in the entire show, which we hear a couple of times, is the human theme, which, if you go back and listen to—

CHRIS PORTER: We first hear it in three, with Jessa. And then we hear it in five.

BILL CURTIS: I want to know what you're calling a human theme.

CHRIS PORTER: I wasn't interested in writing like, 'Jamal's Song' or like 'Wren's Theme'.

JENNY CURTIS: Can you explain what the theme is?

CHRIS PORTER: Yeah. Like, a great example, obviously, is Star Wars, right? Where you hear the bum, bum, bum, bum bum. The da da da da da. That is the Luke Skywalker Jedi theme. It's called the Motif, oftentimes. And it's something that John Williams just – mind blowing. He's the best at it. I just took the route of I don't want characters to have themes. I want my thematic material to have themes. So I wanted there to be like a distrust theme or programming theme, different little tiny motifs. And they all had to be real simple and just spread out like CimTech did get kind of a theme with the bum, bum, bum, bum, bum bum, that you hear a few times.

JENNY CURTIS: So the human theme, which is my favorite piece of music in this show, and it's probably because I lean into the emotion of things. And to me that is the most emotionally gut wrenching piece that comes under some of the most emotionally gut wrenching moments. But this was not something Chris composed originally for this show. So I want to hear the story of where the song came from.

CHRIS PORTER: So this is actually a video you can find if you dig around on Facebook enough you can find this video. My parents had moved down to Solomon's in Maryland, and in their time of finding a place there to live, they had come across this beautiful art sculpture and garden park called Anne-Marie Gardens. It's just a gorgeous place to walk around because in the middle of the forest and the trees, they've just put artwork from different people. And sometimes it's massive sculptures and sometimes it's just little paintings that they've painted into the knots of the trees. And so it has this completely otherworldly feel of just walking into some kind of fairy wonderland where there's art everywhere. And like, sometimes it's an upside down astronaut on a rock, and sometimes it's like this gorgeous sculpture with these completely abstract figures. And at one point they had put a green upright piano in the middle of the forest, and it was not very well in tune because it was out in the woods for four months, but it was in tune enough that people could play it. And so I was there with my family and they were like, you know, you should sit down and play something, come up with something. So I was like, Well, give me a couple of minutes, because I'm not a very good improviser. I just kind of know the feel. And so I started just playing the one note over and over again, which again is both meant to be internally retrospective, but also the ticking of the clock in this particular moment, because like pianos are nothing but mechanical. To me, that's just the way that I feel about them. And so I came up with this theme and I just played it and it's it's not very complicated, it's very simple, but it just had this nice, lilting quality. And at this point, this was very early on in the stages of even dreaming up somewhere. And my mom was like, That should be a theme. And so, like, it sounds like someone floating in space. And I was like, well, we'll see, Mom. We'll see if that happens. Sure enough, when I started working on Jessa's spiel about her other self, I was like, what was that video? What did I play? And I actually had to like, dig it up on Facebook because

my father shared it to Anne Marie Garden's Facebook page and I transcribed it for myself and I was like, this actually would work really well here. But then I was like, what is the theme? What is the – what is the theme representing? And it kind of became this thing of when someone finally breaks apart enough to show their inside self to someone else. It became that and what I called the human theme.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

JAMAL: But how do you get over it?

JESSA: I had to try. Really hard. I wish there was some words of wisdom or some catchy thing that inspired me. But there's not. There's only the simple decision that every time I wake up. I do the best I can.

JAMAL: Look, I haven't been through any kind of trauma like you've experienced.

JESSA: Oh I hope not. No, I hope you never will. But here's the thing to remember. Every time your life changes, for better or worse, you lose the other version of yourself. There's always the other you. The one that said yes. The one that said no. The one that wasn't hit by a drunk driver.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

BILL CURTIS: So you, like, create a voice for the music and then you just start attacking your keyboard to try to see what comes up?

CHRIS PORTER: The way that it works for me. Especially because I wrote it, as I would have a vibe in mind where I'm like, this moment needs to sound tense and hollow, and I can't really explain to you what a hollow sounds like to me, but I know it when I hear it. Not this moment that I just played, but like there are some moments with Margaret where I was like, this needs to feel like something's ramping up, but it's unclear what – I feel a hollow sound here. And so then I would figure out musically what's going on to get to that point, and then I would go back and re-orchestrate it and try to find the sounds that captured the vibe that I have in my brain.

CHRIS PORTER: That's only a short clip of all the things we discussed in the SOLAR Panel. In the extended interview, we discuss the technicalities of music creation, using music as sound design, and even more behind the scenes stories about the creation of SOLAR. Check out our Apple Podcasts Premium Channel to hear more.