

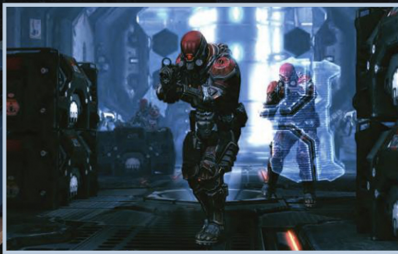
Post

Custom Scores

Evoking emotion with music. By Jennifer Walden

When it comes to creating award-winning custom scores, technology isn't a crutch that holds the music up, it's only a set of tools that helps creative ideas get realized more quickly.

So, while most composers have the same arsenal of technological tools and toys, it is the unique creative experience that makes their music original. Whether schedules and budgets allow for live orchestras, or the project at hand fits better with synthesized sounds, the most important aspect to any custom score is how well the music conveys the emotions and ideas of a project. Music is what speaks the unspoken. It can build tension, add warmth and sell a joke, surprise, and even scare. Creating a custom score ensures that the music doesn't feel "sprayed on," but instead is an inseparable part of the picture.



Rodney Abernethy: The overall sound for the game *Rage* is a blend of guitar, orchestra and electronic elements.



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Nathan Barr (inset) will soon start composing the fifth season of HBO's *True Blood*.

TRUE BLOOD

Nathan Barr (www.nathanbarr.com) is a composer and multi-instrument musician who has written and performed the score for HBO's *True Blood* series for the past four seasons, and will soon begin work on the fifth.

As expected after four seasons, the sound for *True Blood* is well established. Now settled into the groove of things, the biggest challenge for Barr is keeping the themes sounding fresh. "The series has always been a very thematic show in terms of the music. Alan Ball and the shows' creators want some recognizable melodies throughout the show to help propel the story forward. So whether it's 'Bill and Sookie's Theme' or 'Eric and Sookie's Theme,' those melodies are in there. Each season I try and introduce a couple of new instruments to keep the score exciting."

This season, Barr has sought out bizarre stringed instruments to add some interesting flavor to the score. In particular, Barr worked a marxolin into the score. "A marxolin is a weird hybrid violin-dulcimer kind of instrument. It was sort of popular for five minutes 50 years ago. If you dig deep on eBay you come up with these instruments that have been forgotten about outside of the circles of collectors. There are some great sounds that you don't hear that often on TV or in films these days."

In addition to finding new instruments that would work with the established *True Blood* sound, Barr has also developed the character themes to change with the characters. "When you're following the same characters, you can't possibly keep playing the same cue over and over again. It's a matter of mixing up the themes to the point where it sounds like it's developing with the character. For 'Bill and Sookie's Theme,' I actually wrote a 'B' theme because we hear it so much. That was really prominent in the first and second seasons, but not as much in the third and fourth seasons now. It's a fun challenge just figuring out how to play things a million different ways so it sounds fresh, yet, remains recognizable."

At the beginning of a season, Barr has two weeks to score each episode. In that time, he writes and performs all the parts, starting with the episodes' biggest cues. "It's really about the big picture per episode. Finding where the biggest cues are and starting from there because that's usually going to define what happens in the rest of the episode. If I can nail those big moments, the small moments become more apparent."

The sound of *True Blood*, according to Barr, is very cello- and guitar-centric, with the addition of prepared piano and bowed guitar. Being a cellist and guitar player, Barr performs all the parts himself, which he records into Apple's Logic using two Oktava mics. "I play several different instruments, so with *True Blood*, I either start with a prepared piano, or with an acoustic guitar or bowed guitar, or a cello. I like writing at the actual instruments as opposed to just pulling up sounds on a synthesizer. I use Logic for my recording and editing. It's sort of the most flexible and exhaustingly useful application. It's all really covered by Logic, the sequencing, the

recording, and the editing. On a show like *True Blood* I try and focus on the live recording of instruments. The percussive elements are samples, but generally speaking, part of what has become my sound is the fact that I am performing and recording everything myself right there in the studio. That brings an added element of depth because it's all being performed live on the score as opposed to something that is sequenced or that relies more on synthesizers."

This season, the storyline has grown in terms of scope. There is the addition of witches and séances. To score this Barr has incorporated more orchestral elements than usual. "In the first episode this season, we recorded live orchestra for a couple of the bigger cues where Sookie wakes up in fairy land or goblin land. I would write all the parts, and those would get transferred to paper, and we'd record a live orchestra."

For Barr, using a large variety of instruments, which he performs live, is what distinguishes the music on *True Blood*. "I grew up playing cello and guitar equally, and I hated the cello growing up. My parents forced me to play it, and now I'm grateful they did, because it's a big part of my sound. Also, because I play bowed and plucked instruments, there are enormous families of other instruments I can access, whether it's a mandolin or an oud (a

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-Nathan Barr

[Cont. from 43] pear-shaped stringed instrument used in North African and Middle Eastern music), or instruments all over the world. There are a whole bunch of bowed instruments, I can play because I have played the cello. That's what allows me create a unique sound."