

#MusicMonday: Interview with 'American Horror Story,' 'Trophy Kids,' & 'Quick Draw' Composer, Darius Holbert

BY ALLISON LORING | JAN 13, 2014 08:01 AM

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From performing in Texas honky tonks to composing operas, music directing national concert tours to producing albums, working on popular television shows to composing film scores – Darius Holbert has already run the gamut of the music industry, and is looking to do even more.

I spoke with Holbert about composing, what it is like having one of your songs featured on a television show, his upcoming country album, and how one of his lamest gigs almost won him a "lame-off" with Bobcat Goldthwait.



Fan: We actually first spoke a couple years back when you were working on *Hobo with a Shotgun*, but you have also done music for a bunch of popular shows like *American Horror Story*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Friday Night Lights* and now you're working on HBO's *State of Play: Trophy Kids* and Hulu's *Quick Draw* – going back to the beginning, how did your career begin?

Holbert: How much time you got? [Laughs] Going back – I grew up in a musical family; both my parents are musicians so music was always around the house and I was involved in a bunch of different musical



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productions when I was a kid. I used to do a lot of piano recitals and competitions and I won a few national awards – I think the word "prodigy" was bandied about, mistakenly, by one person... or maybe two... I started piano lessons at age three or four and by the time I got into elementary school I finally realized I could get all the girl's attention by showing off on the piano so I was hooked. [Laughs] But I got past all that and I went to a performing arts high school in Dallas called Booker T. Washington, the same school where Roy Hargrove, Erykah Badu, and Norah Jones all went, so I was still continuing to do a lot of music.

But after high school I got kind of burnt out on it, because I'd been doing it for most of my life, so I decided I was going to be an anthropologist. I went to the University of New Mexico and I went to exactly one course of anthropology and it was the most boring thing I've ever been a part of so I ran across the campus directly to the Dean of the music school and I had to get back into it. I finished up my degree at the University of North Texas, go Mean Green, and at the same time I was playing around at a bunch of honky tonks and that's how my rock and roll career got started. Then I was commissioned to write an opera so I moved to my parent's house in northern New Mexico and I had this romantic notion I was going to go up and write the world's greatest opera. The cabin was 85,000 feet up in the mountains, far away from anything else, so I this idea I was going to stock up on canned goods and live this life of the composer/recluse and write this fantastic opera. And I lasted about six weeks before I legitimately did go insane. I thought that the mountain men were after me and they were in collusion with the bats so yeah – it was a nightmare. [Laughs]

I knew I was going to move to either Nashville, Los Angeles, or New York City and my sister was already living in Los Angeles so I moved to Los Angeles right from there. As soon as I showed up in Los Angeles I was doing a ton of different stuff – playing in like 15 different bands, doing a bunch of artist development and production, basically anything I could do to make a little money and hang out with people that were like minded and jump start my career in Los Angeles. I was Britney Spear's musical director for like, a day, and it was a nightmare. I produced some stuff for Bobby Brown, worked with Wu-Tang clan and did a bunch of hip-hop stuff, a bunch of rock stuff, some country stuff, everything I could possibly do.

And then maybe about four or five years ago I started getting old. [Laughs] And now I'm firmly entrenched in the "old" category so I realized that I wanted to get back into scoring. My degrees are in composition and that's kind of what I did during piano performance so it kind of felt like coming home. I started focusing more on just strict composition stuff and I got really fortunate really quickly with some really cool gigs and it's been great ever since. I quit all my touring stuff and now I can work in my drawers all day now and sleep in my bed a night and make a lot more money and it's way better now. [Laughs]

Fan: That is awesome – and it actually leads right into my next question because I know you are an accomplished composer, but you also produce, write, and have toured with a variety of artists like Wu-Tang Clan plus Everlast and Sophie B. Hawkins – how different is producing and working with those commercial artists to composing (besides getting you off the road)?

Holbert: I would say it's about as far as you can get. When I moved into composition I thought there'd be a lot more cross over as far as skills, or contacts especially, but it really is completely different. It's a totally different world, it's a totally different skill set. I think the only thing they have in common is there's actually music being produced, that's really about it. It really is a huge paradigm shift when you go from that world of touring, or musical directing, or making albums even, because it's a different kind of music altogether, even the way that you approach it is different. I was on the road with House of Pain three or four years ago and I was musical directing it so I had to hire the players and do all the arrangements, but it was somebody else's music. There's still a creative element to it, but it has to do more with making sure the performance is right and there's a lot more specific "controlled spontaneity" that's involved in live performance whereas with scoring it's more of a solitary pursuit. It's just between you and the director, producers, or whoever you're dealing with – you can't just wing a solo and then save a hundred people posting it on YouTube later – no one's ever going to hear that again. But whereas when you're scoring something, you're deeply involved in the production aspect of it because that's pretty much all it is.

Fan: And you're also a recording artist yourself (Dariustx) and you're actually working on a country album with Nicole Britton – is that your way of getting a bit more creative and not having to be tied strictly to a nicture?

Holbert: One hundred percent- you hit the nail on the head. I love helping propel stories, I love doing my job as far as a film composer is concerned, but you are tied to somebody's else's story essentially. And I cut my teeth in honky tonks and playing a lot of country music and a part of me loves to just write a song that presents its own lyrical content – that lives in its own place and is not dependent on any kind of collaboration. I always like to work on multiple, different projects at the same time because I feel like if I get too focused on one specific project, it starts to kind of lose the sharp edges so I found bouncing back and forth between things keeps me fresh. Especially projects that are really different, like this great country record we've been wanting to do. I've worked with this singer for a long time and we've been wanting to do this record for quite a while so it'll be a great departure from anything else I'll be working on concurrently so I'm looking forward to it.

Fan: Understandable! And when it comes to shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Friday Night Lights* that are known for their music – what was it like having your music featured on shows where the music was at the forefront a lot of the time?

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Holbert: It was cool because I actually got commissioned for *Grey's Anatomy*, it wasn't just something that was laying around in somebody's catalogue, they needed something very specific. But when it's commissioned like that it's kind of different than actual just scoring because you don't have to worry about hitting beats and you don't have to worry about make sure the verse ebbs or flows – this is just strictly music supervisors on these shows liking something that I had written before, grabbing that, and then their music editors will cut it in and it makes my job infinitely easier because I don't really have to do anything because the thing is already written and they just grab it and throw it in. But it is cool, especially shows like *Friday Night Lights* particularly because the score Explosions in the Sky did for that was fantastic and it was so at the forefront, like you said, and it was so music driven and I wonder sometimes if that really iconic score wasn't a part of that show if it would have been as successful and as compelling.

Fan: So true! What is the craziest situation you have ever encountered when composing for a project?

Holbert: I was working on this movie, *World's Greatest Dad*, which is a Bobcat Goldthwait film with Robin Williams and my buddy, Gerry Brumskill, was the lead composer, but I helped him a bit with it. Gerry had specifically been asked to write a song for the movie and Bobcat had this idea that he wanted this kind of 1920s crooner style song about marijuana. Bobcat's good friends with Tom Kinney, who is the guy that does the voice of Sponge Bob, so he got him in there and we got a bunch of musicians and we wrote a song called "High" and it was one of the more surreal moments of my life – the voice of Sponge Bob signing about getting high and we're all playing this kind of Dixieland version of this music.

After we get done it happens to be just me and Bobcat in the back and we're hanging out eating pizza so we start talking and he asked me about my career, and I already know who he is because I love *Police Academy* of course and I used to love his stand up, and somehow we manage to get ourselves into a lame off – who had done the more lame gigs. So we're trying to out do each other and finally my last silver bullet was, "Well I musical directed Kevin Federline on the Tonight Show" and he goes, "Oh man – that's pretty lame, but I'm still beating you because I was in *Police Academy 4*."

Fan: And finally - what do you have coming up next?

Holbert: I'm scoring this great new horror film called *Old 37* starring Kane Hodder and Bill Moseley which should be out sometime this summer and I'm super excited about the score – it should be really fun.

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