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Darius Holbert: *World's Greatest Composer*

by Katie Garton

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We all need to thank film composers like Darius Holbert for adding suspense, joy, peacefulness or any other emotion to our favorite flicks. Imagine *Jaws* without the warning music every time the shark is about to attack. There's absolutely no suspense; it takes out all the horror and anticipation.

Born into a musical family, Holbert has won several awards at for his film scores. Most recently, some of his work can be heard in Jonas Pate's *Shrink* and, on August 21, in Bobcat Goldthwait's *World's Greatest Dad*. It seems like Holbert can do just about anything in the music world, so he sat down and enlightened us—and made us laugh with the story of how he came to his current position in the film industry.



Katie Garton (MM): I read that you jumped into film scoring because you were “kinda beat up from the rock ‘n’ roll style.” What are the other reasons for beginning to compose for movies?

Darius Holbert (DH): Well, there's a bunch of different reasons. I have a pretty big history as far as composition goes: I was a composer as a young man. I won a bunch of competitions and things like that, and have a couple degrees in composition and arranging. So it's not like I just jumped in. It's more like I deviated from that for a while.

I was playing in a bunch of bands and producing a bunch of records for different people. Then I moved to L.A. and was still playing in a band, doing session and studio work and I just got married last year.

MM: Congratulations!

DH: Thank you very much! I was getting kind of sick of the touring lifestyle and being out on the road. I decided to put a whole bunch of money into upgrading my project studio here. Rather than jumping into it, as corny as this may sound, it really felt like coming home. It felt like scoring films is sort of where I've been heading my whole career, if not my whole life. And ever since then, I've been really fortunate with the work I've gotten. It seems like, at least so far—fingers crossed—I've made the right choice.

MM: So when you first started making the shift, did you contact people or were people contacting you?

DH: It was interesting. I had been doing session and studio work in L.A. for six or seven years at least and I had

established a pretty good rep in town, mainly for playing keys—piano or organ—but also for production and artist development. So I thought, naively, that I could translate this good rep and use all these contacts to help me get started in scoring film and TV. But when I actually made the conscious decision to make the shift, none of those contacts translated at all. They're completely different fields, which meant that I had to start from the bottom again, which was a complete lesson in humility, but the best way to go about it.

I even went on Craigslist and Mandy.com to find student productions that would take a gamble on somebody who didn't have much of a reel. And I did a lot of student theses that wanted single piano notes that were played over and over. It was definitely interesting. I don't want to bag on these younger directors, because honestly that was one of the best things that could happen to me. A lot of these directors are the people that I'm still working with now that they are doing bigger projects with a lot more money. So it was definitely a lesson of humility at the time, but I wouldn't trade that experience for the world.

MM: Do you have a favorite genre?

DH: I sort of established a reputation these days as somebody to go to if you need anything genre-wise. I have a fairly wide spectrum, stylistically, of stuff that I can do. I'm sort of like a jack-of-all-trades; I get calls all the time to sort of fill in the gaps. If a director needs similar music to something that's already been composed, they'll call me up and be like, "Can you mock up some music? We need some Tejano-death-metal-house music" or something.

MM: What director would you love to work with? If you could have anyone call you...

DH: If I could bump Carter Burwell off his gig with the Coen brothers I would do that in a heartbeat. But I would feel bad because Carter is also one of my heroes.

MM: Maybe you could work together.

DH: Yeah, there you go. But I'll tell you this. I was at my parent's house in northern New Mexico a couple weeks ago, listening to some old cowboy music—like old 1940s, Sons of the Pioneers, Roy Rogers-type stuff. All of a sudden the theme from *Raising Arizona* comes on as part of one of the songs I was listening to and I was like, "You gotta be kidding me. Carter didn't write this?" Like [the singer] totally did that yodel thing from *Raising Arizona*. And that's one of my favorite scores. It was like one of my heroes had totally died. It was like when you found out Rafael Palmeiro was doing steroids. It was like part of my youth had died. It totally affected me. It was terrible.

MM: At what stage of production of a movie do you like to start working?

DH: Typically, I try to get in when the movie is locked—when the edits are all done. Even if a director gives me something and says, "Oh yeah, we're at picture lock right now," invariably there's gonna be some tweaks—even after I get my hands on it.

There have been times where I have gone in at the script stage, especially if there are scenes where the actor has to seem like they are playing music or they need to dance to a particular number or if music is more of an actual integral part of the story. When you get more involved in the conceptual stage there's a lot more probability of spinning your wheels. Take for instance, if somebody says, "I want this character's theme to be like this." I'll go back to the studio and I'll work up the theme and then maybe a week later they're like, "Well, with this new draft we totally cut that character out." You end up writing a lot of music that may not even make it in.

As far as efficiency is concerned, get in when the conceptual side is already set. But I like getting involved wherever. In some cases, like I have some new stuff in the Kevin Spacey film *Shrink*, which actually premiered at Sundance. But I didn't have anything to do with it at the time of the premiere. Getting involved after a movie has premiered is rare, and it's as far down the line as you're gonna get. I really run the gamut as far as getting involved really, really early on or getting involved as late as possible.

MM: You have music in another movie, *World's Greatest Dad*, that is coming out soon. What was your experience like working on it?

DH: That was a blast. The film was scored by a good friend and mentor, Gerry Brunskill, who I've worked with for a long time now. That's another case of getting called up because I have a wide range of capabilities.

He called me up and said this is directed by Bobcat Goldthwait, who's the guy from the *Police Academy* movies. I grew up watching those movies, so of course I said I would get involved. He's sort of established himself now as a real quirky writer-director of these great dark movies. And Jerry has worked with him on these films, pretty much every single one. So he called me up and said that Bobcat needed a song with a 1920s-style crooner tradition about smoking weed. So I went into the studio, hired some players. We got together in a room and we banged out this tune and we had Tom Kenny, who is the voice of SpongeBob, come in. He's a friend of Bobcat's apparently, so he was doing all the singing like "I wanna get high" in this 1920s-style, crooner-style song. It was one of the most surreal experiences of my life. It was outstanding.



But I'll tell you one of the best stories of that experience was when I first met Bobcat. Everyone else was setting up or whatever, in the back room eating pizza. I had never met him before and we totally hit it off. We started talking about what we had done and our careers. Somehow it turned into some kind of "lame-off." Where I was like, "I musically directed for Kevin Federline for "The Tonight Show,"" and he goes, "Well I was in *Police Academy 4*, so I win." It was hilarious.

MM: Thanks for all your time.

BH: Oh, I have this record coming out this month that I gotta plug by dariustx. You can check it out online at dariustx.com. I'm excited about that. Thanks for the time. I really appreciate it! Say hi to New York for me!

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