

**Song Exploder**  
**Black Panther - Ludwig Göransson**  
**Episode 131**

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

*("Black Panther" by LUDWIG GÖRANSSON)*

Hrishikesh: Marvel's *Black Panther* was released in theaters on February 16, 2018, and in just a few weeks, it made over a billion dollars worldwide. It's already broken some box office records and it looks like it's going to break some more. The score for the film was created by Swedish composer Ludwig Göransson. His film and TV credits include *Creed* and *New Girl*. He's also a Grammy-nominated producer, who's worked most often with rapper Childish Gambino. In this episode, Ludwig takes apart one of his pieces from *Black Panther*. The track is called "Killmonger," it's the theme for Erik Killmonger, a character played by Michael B. Jordan. *Black Panther* is set in the fictional African nation of Wakanda, and coming up, Ludwig tells the story of doing research and making recordings in Africa, and how he incorporated those into the score for the film. And just a heads up, there are some spoilers coming up. Nothing major, but if you're someone like me who avoids trailers and wants to go into a movie with a clean slate before you see it, this is your spoiler alert. For everyone else, here is Ludwig Göransson on Song Exploder.

*("Black Panther" by LUDWIG GÖRANSSON)*

Ludwig: My name is Ludwig Göransson.

*(Music fades)*

Ludwig: The director of *Black Panther* is Ryan Coogler. I met Ryan at USC. One of my roommates was in the film directing program. And one night, Ryan came over to the house because his classmate was my roommate, so we played pool together and then we just started talking. And one of the first things that me and Ryan was talking about, I remember, was Swedish music, like he knew so much about Swedish bands, Swedish artists. I was like, "How do you know all these people?" And that's how we bonded. I was 23 and Ryan was 21. He was doing his first student film. And he approached me because I think I was the only film composer that he knew [laughter]. So he asked me if I wanted to score his film,

and he was such a cool guy, so obviously I said, “Yes.” I scored all of his student films and all of his feature films. With *Black Panther*, after Ryan had gotten the gig, I don’t even think he asked me if I wanted to do it, like we were talking about the movie like we were already doing it together. So I went to the comic store and read up on my *Black Panther*. And I read the comics. It was right when Ta-Nehisi Coates started to write the comics, so I bought a couple of his issues, and started reading it. And I was just drawn into that world. We had a lot of conversations of what Wakanda was, and where it was, and what countries it looked like. Ryan went to Africa, he did research. He showed me a bunch of his videos from his journey, and he sent me all the pictures, and sent me his inspiration and music that he loved. He came back and started to write the script. And he sent me a first draft very early on. Right after I read it, I called up Ryan and, you know, told him my impressions of the script, how much I loved it, and the only way for me to be able to do this was for me also to do the same kind of research and get that experience. And then, I booked my trip to go there. I went to Senegal for three weeks. I called this Swedish friend of mine, who’s worked with Baaba Maal, one of Africa’s biggest artists.

*(“Traveller” by BAABA MAAL)*

Ludwig: He has had a career for 45, 50 years. He’s done collaborations with so many different artists all over the world. So I got Baaba Maal’s telephone number, and I called him. And he was just about to leave on tour, but he was like, “Just come with me and then we’ll take it from there.” So they picked us up at the airport, and we were going to go to the show and I had no idea what to expect. We drive to the stage, it’s like a small stage built up in this tiny little village. And behind the stage there’s like hundred donkeys and like their donkey carts, so people traveled from like surrounding villages. We see, probably 1,000 people sitting around the stage and just been waiting for his concert.

*(Music fades)*

Ludwig: And the anticipation is very high, it’s so charged, everyone’s so happy.

*(Applause)*

Ludwig: At four in the morning, the show starts.

*(Live concert)*

Ludwig: The energy is insane. He starts singing,

*(Live concert)*

Ludwig: and people go up to him, and put money in his pockets.

*(Live concert)*

Ludwig: And it's basically just like a party for three hours until the sun comes up.

*(Live concert)*

*(Music fades)*

Ludwig: So the end result of all this was, after touring with him for about a week, I got to borrow his studio. I had seen all these fantastic instrumentalists, which are called Griots. And Griot is a word in Africa, for storyteller. So if you're a musician, you're a storyteller. I met so many different Griots, and I invited them to come and record with me. The first thing I did, first day, was to record Sabar drums. It was a family of Sabar drum players.

*(Drums)*

Ludwig: We recorded for five hours, and they played a bunch of different rhythms.

*(Drums fade)*

Ludwig: After that, my second day, I had a Kora player come,

*(Kora)*

Ludwig: and recorded Kora.

*(Kora)*

Ludwig: Mayoro, who's Baaba Maal's assistant, and who helped me assemble the musicians together, we sat for a night and just talked about all the different instruments that would be available.

*(Kora fades)*

Ludwig: And he told me about the Fula flute. Fula flute is from a tribe called Fulani, the Fula tribe. And they have their own type of flute, it's like a wooden flute, it's a very specific sound. And he knew a Fula flute player. So we took the car, and we picked up this player, and his name is Amadou Ba. As soon as we got back to the studio, he started playing. And I was just shocked by the sound of it.

*(Fula flute)*

Ludwig: And I was like this sounds like Killmonger to me. Having read the script, it just connected to me with this character. So I pulled the flute player aside, and I used my translator to tell him about Killmonger.

*(Conversation between Ludwig and Amadou Ba)*

Ludwig: First, I told him about the concept of the movie, it's a superhero movie. Killmonger is the bad guy, but he has good intentions. He wants to make the world better, but in the way that he sees it. He is very impulsive, but he's super smart. He's from Africa, but he grew up in Oakland, and he grew up in America, but he's coming to Africa to take the throne.

*(Conversation between Ludwig and Amadou Ba)*

Ludwig: And he was like, "Okay. I get it." And he closed the door,

*(Door closes)*

Ludwig: and I gave him a note in the strings.

*(Strings)*

Ludwig: And he started playing very mysteriously first, super soft.

*(Fula flute)*

Ludwig: And I could just see him transform into this character.

*(Fula flute)*

Ludwig: And then, he was ramping it up, ramping up the energy.

*(Fula flute)*

Ludwig: All suddenly, like boom! He just hit a high note, and then screamed, “Killmonger! Killmonger!”

*(Fula flute with screams: “Killmonger! Killmonger!”)*

Ludwig: And just went crazy on the flute.

*(Fula flute with screams: “Killmonger! Killmonger!”)*

Ludwig: And [laughter] I got goosebumps, and I was like, “Okay. This is, this is something special.”

*(Fula flute with screams: “Killmonger!”)*

*(Fula flute with screams end)*

Ludwig: After I came back from Africa, in my studio in LA, I was trying to assemble all these tracks and try to see what I could take this music. I had the Killmonger flute, and I had these low strings that I recorded under it, and I sent that to Michael B. Jordan as he was preparing for the role as well. *Black Panther* is my third movie with Ryan Coogler, but it’s also my third movie with Michael B. Jordan, who’s just incredible actor, and just, it’s such a special treat for a composer too, to be able to be a part of someone’s journey like that. And every time I see Michael B. Jordan in the scene, it just comes out of the screen and just immediately just inspires me.

*(Killmonger: “I lived my entire life, waiting for this moment, I trained, I lied, I killed, just to get here”)*

Ludwig: Killmonger’s theme was one of the most difficult pieces to write, because his character was really complex, and it took some time before I understood every layer of his character. And, to me, the music is trying to play his character in this piece of music. It’s four layers, and the first layer is the piano melody.

*(Piano)*

Ludwig: The first time you see Killmonger in the movie, you see him with his back turned against you. He is at a museum in London and he is talking to this curator about these artifacts, and you don't really have an idea who he is, you don't know what his intentions are. So the piece of music starts very soft, it starts mysterious. And the harp is doubling the piano,

*(Harp joins)*

Ludwig: which, to me, kind of represents his genius background. You know, he went to MIT, and did some really extensive training in the military. And when that piano melody turns into the strings, it also kind of translates to his suffering.

*(Strings)*

Ludwig: And then the string and the harp kind of goes together in unison.

*(Harp joins)*

Ludwig: I just love the sound of strings and harp together. It just made it a little bit more sad to me, like an old story.

*(Strings with harp)*

*(Strings with harp end)*

Ludwig: I've listened a lot to Bach lately. Some of that inspiration of that layer came from Bach, especially the "Matthew Passion."

*("St Matthew Passion" by JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH)*

*(Music fades)*

Ludwig: There's a couple of seconds in the scene where you kind of understand that "Okay, Killmonger is there for a reason," and that reason is to take back something that doesn't belong to the museum. So the second layer is the flute,

*(Processed Fula flute)*

Ludwig: which represents his African background.

*(Processed Fula flute)*

Ludwig: All this flute is from the recording with Amadou. But I pitched it down in the beginning.

*(Processed Fula flute)*

Ludwig: And then, all the suddenly, escalates into this chaos with his flute.

*(Processed Fula flute)*

*(Screams)*

*(Screams end)*

Ludwig: And these strings

*(Strings)*

Ludwig: just going up and up in arpeggio.

*(Strings)*

*(Fula flute with screams join)*

Ludwig: In the scene, the curator, she's falling down on the ground, you don't know what's wrong with her. It's like, "Did she just get food poison or something worse?" It escalates and goes bigger. You see the EMTs running up to her, and you think, "Okay, they're going to take care of her." And then suddenly, Klaw just turns around and just shoots her, and that's where the music just cuts out and the 808 starts.

*(808)*

Ludwig: This is the first time in the movie where things just get dangerous, and it comes just out of nowhere. These 808s, when you have this low bass sound just coming out and the theater blasting at you. It's just like, "Okay, it feels like almost like heart beats. Like okay, I'm sitting by the edge of my seat here."

*(808s end)*

Ludwig: These 808s, it's the second section of Killmonger's theme, and it's just establishing what is yet to come. So the third layer is the trap, rap beat production,

*(Trap beat)*

Ludwig: which represents him being from Oakland. I work with a lot of rap artists and hip-hop artists, and I produced a bunch of albums and songs. And I think this production style is inspired by Metro Boomin.

*("No Complaints" by METRO BOOMIN)*

*(Music fades)*

Ludwig: And I was trying to come up with like a beat that could sound like that. And then, when it all comes together with the strings, you know, it's like Metro Boomin meets Bach.

*(Strings with trap beat)*

*(Processed vocals)*

*(Strings with trap beat fade)*

Ludwig: I took Amadou's flute and I took one of the yells, and I pitched it down like an octave or something, and I got this really cool weird "ahh" sound that became a cool layer to this cue.

*(Processed vocals end)*

Ludwig: And then the fourth layer is the punctuation of his character, which is like the [sings brass melody].

*(Strings with brass)*

Ludwig: The strings were recorded in London, at the legendary Abbey Road Studios with a 92-piece orchestra,

*(Strings with brass end)*



Ludwig: with a 40-piece choir.

*(Choir)*

Ludwig: I just needed that sound to just add on to like the mystery and the drama.

*(Choir fades)*

Hrishikesh: In the film, it's eventually revealed that Erik Killmonger and T'Challa, who's the Black Panther and the King of Wakanda, the two of them are cousins.

Ludwig: You know, they're cousins. So I wanted musically to intertwine their themes as well. One of the things that came from Killmonger's theme, which is the flute melody [sings melody].

*(Fula flute)*

Ludwig: That is basically the theme for T'Challa too. But it's played in the brass, in like very royal, like big, confident way.

*(Brass)*

Ludwig: And there's a point in the movie when you go into the ancestral plane, you have the same theme playing for the ancestors but with the strings, because they're shared ancestors.

*(Strings)*

*(Percussion joins)*

Ludwig: And that really translates to, this is really about family. These guys are family.

*(Strings)*

*(Strings fade)*

Ludwig: Killmonger is such an interesting character. In some ways, a lot of people root for him, and so many people identify with him and can understand what he's been going through.

(Synth)

Ludwig: He's had an extremely difficult life, finding his father dead, growing up without a mom, not having really any idea of his identity. To have a character like that get screen time in a big movie like that, that so many people can understand, but still be called the villain, I think it's genius.

(Synth ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the Killmonger cue from the *Black Panther* score, by Ludwig Göransson, in its entirety.

(*"Black Panther"* by LUDWIG GÖRANSSON)

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Ludwig Göransson, and for links to buy or stream his score for *Black Panther*. This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Carlos Lerma creates original illustrations for each episode of this podcast. For this episode, he did a drawing of Michael B. Jordan and Chadwick Boseman as Killmonger and the Black Panther. You can see it on the Song Exploder site or Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of creative, independent podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). Let me know what you thought of this episode. You can find the show on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And if you like the podcast, please leave a review or a rating on Apple Podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.