Song Exploder
John Carpenter - Halloween (Theme)
Episode 147

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.

("Halloween (Theme)" by JOHN CARPENTER)

Hrishikesh: In 1978, John Carpenter wrote, directed, and scored the film *Halloween*. It was made on a $300,000 budget, and ended up grossing over $70 million, making it one of the most successful independent movies ever released. The main theme to the film became one of the most iconic pieces of cinematic music ever made. *Halloween* went on to become a franchise with 10 more *Halloween* films since the original. In October 2018, a new *Halloween* film was released, directed by David Gordon Green. And for the first time since the first film, John Carpenter composed the score. That included remaking his theme song for the new film, this time with the help of his son Cody Carpenter and his godson Daniel Davies. In this episode, the three of them break down how they did it. First, a little history. Here's John Carpenter.

(Music fades)

John: When we made "Halloween" back in '78, we didn't have any money for a composer, so I always knew that I was going to be the composer. We had three days at a recording studio, Sound Arts Studio, in Central LA. I knew I was going to do the main theme to *Halloween*, and I had that down pretty much. Everything else I was going to fake it, just improvise it. So I had three days to do the score. Originally I wrote with the piano. That was the easiest and simplest.

(Piano with ticking sound)

John: But I didn't know how to use the synthesizers at the studio. And so Dan Wyman, the synthesizer teacher at USC, he tuned everything up. So I would say to him, "I want a rhythmic sound here," or, "I want something that sounds like violins."

(Synth joins)

John: I didn't have to confront what would happen if we had a lot of money to hire a composer, because we didn't, so I'll never know what I would have done. But everything worked pretty well. And I think I got all the melodies that I wanted.

(Music fades)

John: After the first movie, I never believed there was much of a story left to tell. But the original people who held the rights decided, "No, that's not a good idea, let's keep making sequels." So I emotionally divorced myself from them long ago.

Hrishikesh: And so, John Carpenter wasn't involved with the sequels. But then, cut to 2016.

John: Well, I heard about another sequel to *Halloween*, and all of a sudden Jason Blum appears. Now, Jason is a high powered, rather successful horror producer in Hollywood, and he said to me, "Well, they're going to make a sequel, so why don't you and I work on it, and we can make it good, we'll make it better." And I said, "Well no one's really challenged me that way, so this is great, I'll do it." The first step in making the new *Halloween* was to find a director. Jason Blum started seeing who was out there, who was interested, and finally came up with David Gordon Green. He and his partner, Danny McBride, had come up with the story. So they came over here to pitch me the story and see if I liked it. I thought it was terrific and they said, "Well, will you do the music?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll do it with my son and godson, the three of us have been putting out albums and we'll do it together." So that's how it all came about.

Cody: I'm Cody Carpenter. Conceptually, we wanted to not stray too far from how my dad did it in the original film. So, we use a lot of similar sounds and instruments from the first score, but kind of updated and modernized. The piano was the first sound that we used, because that's kind of the main focus of the piece.

(Piano)

Daniel: I'm Daniel Davies. Something that John pointed out early on is that the purity of that piano is what makes it scary and it was important to keep that.

John: The piano from the new movie is clearer and brighter than the old sound. You need to have that piano. Crisp, clear, and upfront, and pure. So that everything else can surround it

(Synth joins)

John: and be the terrifying, bizarre elements of the piece.

(Synth)

John: Daniel brought over a couple of synthesizers that we chose from.

(Synth)

Daniel: There are so many synths now that can come close to those original sounds.

(Synth)

Daniel: The Oberheim OB-6.

(Synth)

(Synth fades)

Daniel: Part of what makes the original cool is that it's not done with a computer. So you have human error, which creates a certain charm. But now, we get so wrapped up in making everything quantized and perfect. I like to try and steer things a little bit away from that. So we double track all the synths to make them sound bigger and different. So we would do one pass.

(Synth)

Daniel: And then do another pass, and this is going to be slightly different.

(Synth)

Daniel: And then we put that together.

(Synth)

Daniel: I like stereo and I wanted it to sound wide in the theater. I think it's important to have that movement.

(Synth)

(Synth fades)

Daniel: Sound-wise, I think the most challenging is the percussion and those original ticking sounds.

(Piano with ticking sound)

Daniel: Finding a way to stay true to the original but make it new.

(Music fades)

Daniel: So we use clock sounds,

(Clock sound)

Daniel: and then pitched those to then create that ticking.

(Ticking sound)

Daniel: And then when you pan them hard left,

(Ticking sound)

Daniel: and right,

(Ticking sound)

Daniel: creates a phase, a chorus kind of effect. And then, I'm hitting a box, and de-tuning it, and distorting it to create that kick that's in there.

(Beat joins)

(Music fades)

John: One of the most significant changes in the new score is that we use guitar on it. Daniel is a maestro on the guitar. He can make the guitar sound like other things and use it in other ways, inventive ways.

(Beat with guitar)

Cody: We had just finished touring and we played the original *Halloween* theme many, many times, and we had our own arrangement that we played on tour.

John: You know, we were so used to playing it live, and we're a five-piece rock and roll band, so we played it rock and roll. So, maybe that crept into the new soundtrack.

(Beat, piano, and guitar)

(Piano, synth, and guitar)

John: Watching David's *Halloween* movie was just another film for me,

(Synth)

John: that's just how I looked at it, and made it fun to score, but it wasn't my movie. It's David's movie and he did a terrific job with it. I'm very proud of the music. The way it sounds now is just so much further along than what I did back then. But to me, the really incredible part is working with Cody and Daniel. I'm most proud and I'm most emotionally connected with the journey with these two guys, and the journey was just a *blast*.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's John Carpenter's theme to *Halloween*, the 2018 version, in its entirety.

("Halloween (Theme)" by JOHN CARPENTER)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about John Carpenter and the *Halloween* franchise, including the 2018 film, featuring the new theme.
This episode was produced and edited by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from Nick Song. Carlos Lerma made the art for this episode, which you can see at songexploder.net. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. If you want a Song Exploder t-shirt for yourself or your favorite creative listener, go to songexploder.net/merch. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.