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.

("Transparent (Main Title Theme)" by DUSTIN O'HALLORAN)

Hrishikesh: *Transparent* is an Amazon original series, created by Jill Soloway. It's about a family where the father, played by actor Jeffrey Tambor, comes out to his children and to the world at large as transgender. The first season was released in September 2014. It was critically acclaimed and won a lot of awards, including an Emmy for Outstanding Main Title Theme Music. In this episode, composer Dustin O'Halloran breaks down how he made the *Transparent* theme, using an 80-year old piano and channeling his own family nostalgia.

("Transparent (Main Title Theme)" by DUSTIN O'HALLORAN)

(Music fades)

Dustin: My name is Dustin O'Halloran, and I am the composer for *Transparent*. Jill Soloway has been a really old friend of mine. We've known each other for a pretty long time. And a couple of years ago, she was on a trip to Berlin, and she came here, and she was telling me about this new pilot she was working on. And she said that she had been writing the script, listening to the *Piano Solos Vol. 2* record that I made.

(Piano)

Dustin: Like all good collaborations, usually there's a friendship that starts in something that's more organic. And I just loved that it was just like her finding people that somehow she had connected with along the way to be a part of it.

(Piano)

Dustin: She was telling me the show's sort of autobiographical because her father came out four or five years ago. And that was sort of the inspiration for the whole show.

(Transparent audio clip: "Listen I have, I, I need to talk to you about something. There's a big change going on, and, oh God. I love you kids, I love you kids, I love you kids, I love you kids, I love you kids")

Dustin: I watched the whole pilot, and Jeffrey Tambor's performance was so strong, and it was so fragile and open. And that was really what I connected with, this sensitivity. So, for me, that was the part that I thought, you know, maybe I can get into this. I could see that there was so much to explore in his character, and his timing is so funny, but it's also, there's just these moments in his performance that are so real and fragile, and I think connect on so many levels with a lot of people, not just the trans community. It's just about finding yourself at such a late age in your life, and I think that resonates with a lot of people.

(Piano)

Dustin: This is just a special piano to me. It's a Swiss piano from the 30s, and it's the piano I originally recorded the *Piano Solos Vol. 2* on, and I don't know why, but the sound of that record is so attached to this specific piano.

(Piano)

Dustin: My mom was part of this hippy Methodist church, and I was probably about 6 or 7, and I'd really wanted to learn piano. And my mom didn't really have much money, and so she got the church organist to teach me after Sunday service. It's ultimately the instrument I feel most connected to. So that was definitely the centerpiece of the score.

(Piano)

(Piano ends)

Dustin: The opening titles are just nostalgic, because it's all these old VHS clippings of bar mitzvahs and parties and childhood. And, you know, it's about this family, this deep family history in all of these secrets that are sort of unlocked during the course of the story as it unfolds. I began to, sort of, fill things in. I knew that it was the opening title, so I felt it should be a bit fuller, and we could still keep that understated feeling that we were looking for.

(Harmonium)

Dustin: The harmonium is a big part of it. It just adds this really rich tone that, sort of, hides under the piano.

(Harmonium)

Dustin: The harmonium is sort of like a poor man's choir or a string section, it really fills these legato notes for you. And it's just such a beautiful, kind of, humble sound. I don't want everything to be so perfect in the playing, and so sometimes I really try to just go for those first takes.

(Harmonium ends)

Dustin: When you put all of the sounds together, you don't hear it as much, but there's more of a subconscious thing. There's a really nice fragileness in the imperfections.

(Bell sound)

Dustin: The idea's to keep the piano, the centerpiece and not overtake it. I really love when you get these, kind of, doubling the piano parts, so you can get extra resonating. Even if you can't hear the instrument, it just sounds like the piano has got this extra, sort of, sparkle and resonation.

(Bell sound)

Dustin: It's not actually a vibraphone, it's this weird handmade instrument that I got in this shop here called Glockenladen. The guy who owns it, his parents pre-war owned a machine shop that made parts for tanks and military pieces, and he was their grandson and when he took over the company, he was a musician, and he hated the idea of the history of the company. So he started taking all the metal work machines and making instruments out of metal.

(Bell sound ends)

Dustin: I have this old tape recorder that I got at a flea market. It's one of these little handheld tape recorders. I'm afraid that it's going to break one day because it has this perfect warble. And it's just, I really, I really love this sound. It just has this beautiful lo-fi tape sound, and I really love, kind of, adding lo-fi sounds to more Hi-Fi sounds.

(Strings)

Dustin: I wanted everything to sound like it was going through tape machines. In the same way that the images of the title, you have this VHS kind of stutter, and I kind of wanted everything to feel like it had a, kind of, tape analog feel to it.

(Strings end)

Dustin: I did an earlier version that just ended up not feeling right. Like I was probably thinking too much about it being an opening title piece, more of a statement like, "The show is beginning." [laughter] I think that I had to, kind of, pull back, and just remember that I just needed to make a really great piece of music that would fit the images, and I didn't, didn't have to be anything big. And I think once I realized that it helped me just kind of go back and do something a little bit more understated.

           I always find that I, kind of, have to do one really bad version or something that isn't good to get to the good stuff. And sometimes that's actually a good way to start, is to do something that doesn't work, because knowing what doesn't work actually helps you figure it out. I usually, I just, sort of, try to put myself into a place where I can connect with what they're looking for. And I think that me

(Bass)

Dustin: and my mom and my brother growing up in the 70s, and me learning to play piano, and we're a pretty tight family. And we have been through a lot of really difficult times as well, and watching these images, because, you know, these opening images are all, sort of, very innocent, but

(Strings join)

Dustin: in the series, there's a lot of really intense secrets that, sort of, come out through the whole family. The loss of innocence is really what I was connecting with.

(Bell sound joins)

(Bell sound)

(Bell sound ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the main title theme for *Transparent*, by Dustin O'Halloran, in its entirety.

("Transparent (Main Title Theme)" by DUSTIN O'HALLORAN)

Hrishikesh: For more on Dustin O'Halloran and *Transparent*, visit songexploder.net. You can watch the opening title sequence, and find links to more of Dustin's music. Next time on Song Exploder,

("Stonemilker" by BJÖRK)

Björk: My name is Björk, and I'm here to talk about "Stonemilker" on my album *Vulnicura*.

("Stonemilker" by BJÖRK)

Hrishikesh: You can find all of the past episodes of the podcast and subscribe to future episodes at itunes.com/songexploder. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I send out mixtapes on Fridays on my newsletter. You can find links to all of these at songexploder.net. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Stonemilker" by BJÖRK)

(Music fades)