

**Song Exploder**  
**Wonderly - The Daily (Theme)**  
**Bonus Episode**

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

*("The Daily (Theme)" by WONDERLY)*

Thao: The Daily is a hit podcast from the *New York Times*, hosted by Michael Barbaro. Every weekday, over 1.7 million people download the show. It launched in February 2017, and in honor of its two-year anniversary, we're publishing a bonus episode about the show's theme song. It was originally published on the *New York Times* website in 2018. Here is Song Exploder producer Hrishikesh Hirway.

Hrishikesh: The theme song for a show, whether it's on TV or on the radio or on a podcast, faces a lot of pressure. Often before anything else, it's the theme that tells you something about the personality of a show and its point of view. And while the content of every episode changes, a theme has to stay the same while still setting the stage appropriately for what's to come. And ultimately, it becomes an indelible part of the show itself. So when the team for the *New York Times* was getting The Daily podcast started, they were thinking about all these challenges. Here's Michael Barbaro.

Michael: There are some really unique needs on a show like this. You have to listen to it every morning. It needs to announce the world to you. And it has to make you feel like you're excited to get through the next 20 minutes. And it needs energy but not too much energy, because a lot of people are consuming this in the morning and you don't want to like throw too much at them. But you don't want to put them back to sleep, because they just woke up. So it's this really complicated and tricky audio math that I do believe they got quite right.

Hrishikesh: When he says, "They," Michael is referring to Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsverk of the composing duo, Wonderly. Coming up, Ben and Jim break down how The Daily's theme music was created. They got the audio math right, but it wasn't a straightforward journey. Let's start from the beginning.

*("The Daily (Theme)" by WONDERLY)*

Michael: I'm Michael Barbaro, and I'm the managing editor and host of The Daily from the *New York Times*.

*("The Daily (Theme)" by WONDERLY fades)*

Michael: The Daily is a five day a week show, it's about 20 minutes long, and we try to make sense of the world in one or two segments that approach news in a narrative or explanatory way. We needed music that was going to hold up and compliment the editorial content of the show. Lisa Tobin, who is the executive producer for all of *New York Times* audio, has had a long standing relationship with a group of musicians, Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsverk of Wonderly.

Jim: This is Jim Brunberg.

Ben: I'm Ben Landsverk and we are Wonderly.

Jim: We were quite surprised and honored when we got the call.

Ben: When they called us, it was right after the new year, and we were about to kind of take a break. Jim was about to go out of town, I was about to start working on a different project. So we essentially just said, here's our SoundCloud page.

Jim: We said, "Well, look at our library, and see if any of the types of music that we already have are what you're looking for."

Michael: And I did. And I played as many of them as I could. And I would kind of keep a log of which ones I liked. And that's where things started.

Jim: We were surprised that when we got back, they said yes we love this one.

*(Wonderly song)*

Jim: The song that they chose, it's sort of a punk-russian, rock and roll song.

Ben: Not anything that I would necessarily associate with news. It had this crazy skronky guitar.

*(Guitar joins)*

Jim: Little Elvis Costello organ.

*(Organ joins)*

Ben: Kind of a, almost like a circusy feel sometimes [laughter].

Jim: It was the last thing in the world that we thought the New York Times would like. [Laughter] We were kind of shocked when they chose that piece.

*(Music ends)*

Ben: So we started this process of trying to tweak it, make it into something that would suit all of their needs.

*(Wonderly song)*

Michael: We would start with a phone call and then they'd go off, and come back, and we would have a marathon conversation about how it made us feel, and what worked.

Jim: It went through maybe a dozen permutations.

*(Music fades)*

*(Wonderly song, smoother version)*

Jim: But it went from being this thing with a lot of attitude to sort of getting smoothed out along all the edges.

Michael: We kept going back and forth and getting iterations, but we all felt it wasn't quite right.

*(Music ends)*

Michael: It was too melancholy, it was too slow, it was a little too moody.

Jim: All of the work we had done, it was completely tossed out the window, which is fine, that's a normal thing when you're making music. So we asked him what he wanted to hear. We sort of got personal with it.

Michael: I was in love with the theme music for *Westworld*,

*(“Main Title Theme - Westworld” by RAMIN DJAWADI)*

Michael: the really popular HBO drama. And the sound is sort of like, [sings the violin melody].

Jim: Michael sang to us, this piece of music. I had never heard *Westworld*. The thing that really got us going wasn't listening to *Westworld*, it was listening to Michael Barbaro sing the theme from *Westworld*.

Michael: [Laughter]

Jim: [Laughter] That's what all of a sudden made sense.

Michael: [sings the violin melody]

*(Music ends)*

Jim: Suddenly something clicked. It was like, “Oh that's what we're going for.” Strident, dramatic, but a very rational overtone. I ran over to the piano, Ben picked up his viola, and we just threw that theme out there, that is now still the melody of the piece.

*(The Daily theme melody)*

Ben: All of the strings on this are violas.

*(Violas)*

*(Viola slides)*

Ben: That whale sound effect is an effect that you can get by just lightly running your finger up and down the string while you're bowing it so it catches all the natural harmonics on the string.

*(Viola slides)*

Jim: The guitar's stating a similar type of dissonant discomfort.

*(Guitar slides)*

Jim: I have this analog delay pedal that I use, just turning the knob slowly down until it grinds to a halt.

*(Guitar distorted sound effects)*

Jim: And so you end up with really spiky stuff sometimes.

*(Guitar ends)*

Jim: We exist in this extremely polarized time. When we're asked to write a piece of music that supports the emotional landscape of the news, it's going to have elements that are jarring, so there's a sweeping melody, and there's some ugliness supporting it from time to time. Then we recorded the drums.

*(Shaker)*

Ben: They wanted a big open,

*(Tambourine joins)*

Ben: You know, some big hits.

*(Cymbal crashes, kick drum and snare join)*

*(Cymbal crashes end)*

Ben: And then a drop down where Michael would talk so there's all sorts of room to talk about the day's top story.

*(Double bass joins)*

Ben: There is a double bass that I play.

*(Double bass)*

Jim: The direction we've been going with this piece is that we don't want it to ever land and give you that comfortable feeling of authority, because it's not the news authority, it's the news contemplation. So I remember before you did the bass part, it's like, "OK whenever possible, don't play the tonic."

Ben: Right.

Jim: Play inversions of the chords. So if it's a C minor chord, don't play a C note, play

Ben: An E flat,

Jim: An E flat,

Ben: or G.

Jim: or G. So that it's never going to really land. The bass part by itself, it might not even sound

*(Drums join)*

Jim: like the song, because it's sort of a constant series of inversions.

*(Drums along with double bass)*

Ben: Kind of at the last minute, we got some direction from Andy Mills, who's one of the producers, and he sent us this beautiful piece of Cliff Martinez music from The Knick, the score to that series.

*("I'm In The Pink" by CLIFF MARTINEZ)*

Ben: And there's arpeggiation and some electronica but still very, very simple and kind of contemplative.

*(Music fades)*

Ben: And we were like, "Let's try something like that."

*(Arpeggios)*

Michael: I describe it as a siren, it's this pulsating sound that's kind of going up and down. When you think about why a siren made sense for this show, it's because we launched The Daily on February 1st. We had just had an excruciatingly partisan angry presidential election. The country was deeply riven. And a couple weeks into this new presidency, the country was convulsing from a series of changes, challenges to our healthcare system, to our immigration system, and

it's a little bit that siren, like a police car going by and just kind of throttling you and making you think about what is going on here. And the whole point of the show was to disentangle and to explain this extraordinarily consequential and incredibly difficult to understand moment in our history. And that siren to me is both the audio DNA of the show and kind of a metaphor for the show itself.

Jim: As opposed to having a conclusion, the unresolved aspects of it still are bubbling under the surface. That's kind of how we feel after we hear the way Michael sums up and discusses the news. It's not resolved.

Ben: So the little wurlitzer, the upward [sings]

*(Wurlitzer joins)*

Ben: keeps asking a question, all the way to the end. And that's the last thing you hear.

*(Wurlitzer)*

*(Wurlitzer ends)*

Thao: And now, here's the theme to The Daily, by Wonderly, in its entirety.

*("The Daily (Theme)" by WONDERLY)*

Thao: For more information on Wonderly and The Daily, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). This episode was produced and edited by Hrishikesh Hirway and Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. 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](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.