

**Song Exploder**  
**House of Cards - House of Cards (Main Title Theme)**  
**Episode 7**

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.

*("House of Cards (Main Title Theme)" by JEFF BEAL)*

Hrishikesh: In this episode, composer Jeff Beal deconstructs the main title theme music to the Netflix original series *House of Cards*. The show's been nominated for multiple Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Original Main Title Theme and Outstanding Music Composition. The show was adapted from a British series of the same name by writer Beau Willimon, and director and executive producer David Fincher. Coming up, Jeff talks about his collaborative process with Fincher, and how they found the mood and musical palette for the show and its theme, and how it changed from season one to season two. By the way, right now, you're hearing the season one version. I interviewed Jeff at his home where he produces every part of the score, including a 16-piece orchestra that he records in his cavernous living room. A brief word of warning, if you haven't watched the first season, there's a spoiler about how that season ends. And now, here's the main title theme to *House of Cards* on Song Exploder.

*("House of Cards (Main Title Theme)" by JEFF BEAL)*

*(Music fades)*

Jeff: I am Jeff Beal, composer. I do the music for *House of Cards*. I had worked with David Fincher on a commercial, probably about six or seven years ago. And this was around the time I had been working on *Rome*, a series for HBO. So I saw in the trades, you know, this show was happening with David's name attached, and I kept in touch, and we'd never worked together since. And I thought, *this might be a good match for us, you know?* I'd watched a little bit of the British show, and that was, I think, that was part of my pitch to David is that I sort of used the *Rome* thing. And I said, "Well," I said, "You know, even though *Rome* was a period drama, it was very much about politics, and sort of operatic scale cast, and storytelling." After I first met with David to sort of talk about the project, and got his initial thoughts about music, and we sort of put our heads together, based on his sort of way of thinking about music, and how much music informs his choices, he actually asked me to write some sketches before

he started shooting. And, of course, before we had the meeting, and before I wrote these sketches, they shared with me, I think, about four or five scripts; early drafts of what became season one. So it was very much Beau's sense of language, and the way he sort of created this world that inspired some of the early, early work. The thing that I liked about the British show is this sort of dark humor to it. And I said, "Yeah, the music's definitely going to have to find a way to sort of give the audience permission to sort of laugh at the sardonic darkness." Of course, once he called me in, you know, he gave me some of his thoughts on it, which were interesting, and some of them surprising to me. There was one song he really liked, the Supertramp "Crime of the Century."

*("Crime of the Century" by SUPERTRAMP)*

Jeff: Just a great song and a section of that song towards the end, where it just becomes a sort of driving piece,

*("Crime of the Century" by SUPERTRAMP)*

Jeff: with the sense of sort of operatic sort of classicism and sort of gravitas. But it also had a very gritty, earthy, and almost jazzy or bluesy, kind of some occasional rock and roll.

*("Crime of the Century" by SUPERTRAMP)*

Jeff: You know, we dissected that together, and sort of thought about why that spoke to him. That's the show. The show is, it's all about the underbelly of Washington, the dark corners, what you don't see, and what really happens as opposed to sort of *The West Wing*, you know, heroic more aspirational, this sort of "Hail to the Chief," you know, Washington than your typical sort of film score gestures about the capital and politics.

*(Music fades)*

Jeff: I wrote about four sketches for David. One of the things we talked about in our first meeting he said was, "We kind of need a call to arms."

*(Synth pad with bass)*

*(Piano and beat join)*

Jeff: And when you listen to it, it has a lot of the elements that became the main title theme. It's got that bassline. It's got that sort of cloud of dark electronics that sort of proceed it, like a fog or something. And the tune is there, although, in this case, it was just played by the piano, very simple orchestration. And then in the second time it goes around, the snare drum comes in.

*(Snare joins)*

Jeff: Very simple, but there's a tune in there, there's a little sequence of chords and melody.

*(Music fades)*

Jeff: Part of the reason sketching is useful is because it's like the bones of something. If the structure of the skeleton has integrity, it should be able to stand without an abundance of, sort of, instrumental embellishment. And so, by sketching and by doing simple versions of themes, you are able to, sort of, make sure that you have an idea [laughter].

*(Piano)*

Jeff: I always thought of this as sort of the puppet master theme. The idea that like Kevin Spacey's character is just a sort of manipulator, who's a virtuoso at pulling the strings on people, and getting them to do what he wants them to do. But the reason I'm sharing this one in the context of the main title is, when we got around to finally doing the arrangement, David said it would be cool if the main title felt like the sort of stew of a lot of different elements from the score, which would then be deconstructed into its individual parts. So you'll hear this sort of descending chromatic line and the high piano that became one of the signatures of the main title sequence. As the sketch grows, the electric bass comes in.

*(Electric bass joins)*

Jeff: So it's this sort of minimalist piano motif, but by putting that bass under it, it sort of gave it a tension of something that's pushing against it. David and I talked about the piano a little bit, because that was in the Supertramp queue, and it's an instrument

*(Strings join)*

Jeff: I like a lot. And it felt like a good instrument for Kevin's character because it can be very precise, and very sort of mechanical in a way, which I love about it.

*(Music fades)*

Jeff: The sort of call to arms thing, that was dropped into the main title sequence, and it never left once it was in there. That was what we were going to do. And I started, you know, a few passes through. I started to work on the arrangement. The story of the main title sequence is, visually, lyrical and flowing. But there, I remember this came straight from sort of Beau's original scripting of the main title. It's basically the whole idea of the sun going down in Washington. You know, you start in really broad daylight and as the sequence progresses, you end up in night. So you, so there was a way in which you went from something very open, and airy and light to like the darkness falling [laughter], you know? So that was a little bit of a visual storytelling thing I tried to play off of. The first thing we hear is the fog, the fog of [laughter] the cloud of doom. It's just a sort of low synth drone.

*(Synth drone)*

Jeff: Shortly after that comes the bassline,

*(Electric bass)*

Jeff: which I know David affectionately referred to as the riptide. I always liked that description. It's kind of like the idea of something that pulls you under [laughter], you know? Basically it's a combination of several things: it's analog-y, modeled synth things that I've designed, some of them I've had for a long time. And there's a couple different of those bass samples mixed together. But I also recorded a live bass player playing the part. It's actually my son, Henry, who is a wonderful young musician. He's actually now studying Jazz Bass. The bassline was so important, and the orchestration was getting big enough, I actually recorded the bass, an octave above. It gives it enough mid-range content, so that when all this other stuff is happening, that bass is still driving. One of the fun things about the composition, for me, was that the harmony changes a lot over that bassline. In fact, bass is always playing an A minor, but the harmony sometimes goes to A major.

*(Strings join)*

Jeff: And it creates this very strange dissonance, and this sense of collision. It's basically a wrong note, you know? It's like the bass player is playing the wrong note, but it doesn't sound like a wrong note because it's ingrained, it's got its own logic to it. It's almost like Frank will push through anything, he doesn't care, he's not going to stop playing [laughter] those notes.

*(Music fades)*

Jeff: My original sort of call to arms sketch two times through, which is kind of the original demo was almost long enough to cover the main title sequence, but we needed some more time. And I also had this direction from David to sort of work in another theme. So what I did was I kind of extended the intro. I added a lot of percussion, but I also added the little puppet master riff [sings riff],

*(Strings)*

Jeff: you know, that thing. It has a slightly different cadence because this is in 4/4, and the puppet master theme was always in 3/4.

*(Piano)*

Jeff: Phrases are broken up a little bit, but it's sort of, it's still got that descending chromatic line. Another layer that was sort of one of the last things I came up with, but was really useful, was the trumpet.

*(Trumpet)*

Jeff: I'm a trumpet player. And, again, it's the most expected cliché thing you'd hear. You know, a show about Washington would be that sort of military trumpet kind of thing.

*(Trumpet)*

Jeff: Because we're seeing the sort of iconic shots of Washington, it just felt right to have something that references that icon, because obviously the rest of the composition is telling you that this isn't the heroic version of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington monument. And there's a way in which it's sort of lonely to me too. I like the sort of loneliness of it.

*(Trumpet)*

Jeff: One of the things David visually did was to pull out a lot of the people in some of the time-lapse shots he had. It was much creepier seeing some of those shots with no people in them. It just made it feel like it was a ghost town or had this sort of surreal quality to it.

*(Trumpet)*

Jeff: Basically in talking to David Fincher about the second season, it was just sort of surprising to me, but I think we were spotting the first couple episodes. He sort of started giving notes on the main title about what he wanted different. You know, David saw the second season as even more operatic and darker too, which was shocking to me because [laughter] the first season was pretty dark. But you know who everybody is. You've seen who Frank is and what he can do. You know, he's killed somebody in the first season. I mean, it's obviously very, nothing's going to get in the way of what this guy wants to do. In general, for main titles, you know, people get attached, especially when they like something. So I was very careful, you know, to like steer the ship enough, but not so far as to make it feel like your old friend was not your old friend anymore. So I added some voices, some voice samples to a lot of it.

*(Voice samples)*

Jeff: I also added some low strings to the intro.

*(Cello)*

Jeff: The high string line that used to be [sings high string line],

*(Strings)*

Jeff: you know, sort of puppet master theme, we just do that in the cellie.

*(Strings)*

Jeff: So again, it's lower, everything's sort of skewing down, skewing darker, so that it feels like this cloud has sort of come over the whole thing. The sort of lightness and sense of that type of energy is dissipated. You know, he's no longer the puppet master, he's already the vice-president in season two. We know he's

very much in command, so there's less of a game going on and much more of a, it's like the ascent to the throne.

*(Strings)*

*(Strings fade)*

Jeff: You know, I think so many networks or even filmmakers are afraid of a real main title sequence. It's sort of an old-fashioned idea, but the whole idea of a little, mini film that settles you into a world and gets you ready to experience something is a wonderful, sort of a storytelling device. You know, it sort of frames a moment for you, and gets you settled into what you're about to take in.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the season two version of the main title theme to *House of Cards*.

*("House of Cards (Main Title Theme)" by JEFF BEAL)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more info on Jeff Beal and *House of Cards*, including a link to Jeff's website and a link to buy the season one score on iTunes. I've also included a link to the Supertramp song that inspired David Fincher. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find this show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.