

**Song Exploder**  
**Moonlight - Nicholas Britell**  
**Episode 95**

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.

*("Moonlight" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Hrishikesh: The film *Moonlight* tells the story of its main character, Chiron, in three chapters: when Chiron's a young boy, nicknamed "Little," when he's a teenager, and goes by Chiron, and when he's an adult, nicknamed "Black." For each chapter of the film, composer Nicholas Britell created a theme, and in this episode, Nicholas takes those themes apart, revealing how they all evolved out of a single piece of music. The score for *Moonlight* was nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe, and the film itself won the Golden Globe for Best Drama. This episode is part of a series I'm doing in conjunction with *New York Magazine's* site *Vulture*, looking at awards worthy film music from the season. The first was with Jóhan Jóhansson on the score for *Arrival*. The second was with Justin Hurwitz on *La la land*, and now Nicholas Britell on the score from *Moonlight*. For more visit [vulture.com/awards](http://vulture.com/awards).

*("Moonlight" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: My name's Nicholas Britell, and I'm the composer of *Moonlight*.

*(Music fades)*

Nicholas: When I first read it, I was just overwhelmed by this feeling of beauty and poetry. That was really the starting point for my personal experience with the film. There was just this incredible sense of beauty and of sensitivity and tenderness and intimacy in the screenplay. The director of *Moonlight* is Barry Jenkins. And what was amazing to me when I first saw the early cuts of the film after it was shot, it was how well Barry had preserved that feeling of poetry in the movie.

*(Moonlight audio clip:*

*Juan: "I was a wild little shorty, man. Just like you. Running around with no shoes on, when the moon was out. This one time, I ran by this old, this old lady. I was runnin' and hollerin', and cuttin' a fool, boy. This old lady, she stopped me. She said, 'Runnin' around, catching up all that light. In Moonlight, black boys look blue. You blue, that's what I'm gon' call you. "Blue"!"*

*Little: "So your name 'Blue'?"*

*Juan: [Chuckles] "Nah." [Pause] "At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be."*

Nicholas: So, you know, my first emotional reaction to the film is that sense of poetry. And I actually was saying to myself [laughter], you know, "What is the musical analog of poetry?" And among the first things I sent to Barry was a piece of music I wrote that I called "Piano and Violin Poem" [laughter] because I was sort of trying to channel this idea. And that actually is "Little's Theme."

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: It's a piano with these alternating harmonies.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: It's going between the major one and the minor four chord. You're in a major key, so there's this sense of stability, but at the same time, the alternation back and forth, creates, I think a feeling for at least for me, a feeling of introspection. One of the things that I focused on when I first saw the film was, I was imagining how to get inside Little's point of view. You know, he doesn't say much. He is quiet, but you know that there's a lot that he's thinking and that he's feeling. That idea of introspection and thinking internally felt right with these kinds of harmonies.

*(Music ends)*

Nicholas: And there's a violin that's doubling the melody on top.

*(Violin)*

Nicholas: The sound of the violin in that piece was something that I thought about right away.

*(Violin)*

*(Violin fades)*

Nicholas: I've collaborated extensively with a very dear friend of mine, Tim Fain, who's the violinist. And what I asked him to do was to play it as quietly as he possibly could, while still generating enough sound that he felt comfortable with the note. And then we recorded it very close to a mic.

*(Violin)*

*(Violin ends)*

Nicholas: I actually do a lot of experimentation with reverb, because the sound that you hear of an instrument is entirely related, really, to where you're hearing the instrument. The space that you put an instrument in changes so much of the character, you know? And so I often will, with recordings that I make, I will experiment with, "What do they sound like in different spaces?" And so with Tim's violin line, the ocean is a big part of the film, not just literally, but symbolically. And there's something to me, just musically that the sound of that long verb on the violin, to me, it almost felt like sounds almost like washing over itself somehow.

*(Violin)*

*(Violin ends)*

Nicholas: There's actually another piano underneath the first piano, which fades in over the course of the track. The first piano is a grand piano, a fully in tune, grand piano [laughter]. And

*(Piano)*

Nicholas: the second one is more of a, a sort of noisier, upright piano with a loud mechanism.

*(Piano)*

Nicholas: It's not a really incredibly in tune piano [laughter], but I think that's what's beautiful about it. Different pianos have different feelings and different characters and it feels so human and so true.

*(Piano)*

*(Piano ends)*

Nicholas: With *Moonlight*, which is divided into three chapters, the first chapter is the main character, Chiron, as a young boy where he goes by the name "Little." The second chapter is when he's in high school, and he goes by Chiron, which is his name, so chapter two's called, "Chiron." And then chapter three is many years later when he's really in his late twenties, and he goes by "Black." One of the interesting challenges I think from a musical perspective is how do you provide a sense of cohesion across chapters, while also allowing for transformation? And Barry told me about his love for chopped and screwed music, which is a style of Southern hip hop, where you take tracks and you slow them down. And in the process of slowing the music down, the pitch goes way down.

*(Southern hip hop music)*

Nicholas: You get this incredible, beautiful, deepened and enriched sonic texture. We immediately started talking about, "Well, could we do that to the score? You know, could we actually write music, classical music for the score, and could we apply these chop and screw techniques to it?" And I was immediately into it. I said, "I know we could do this."

*(Music fades)*

Nicholas: That was an early exciting idea for us, this idea of my writing, you know, orchestral music, and then, as a part two to that process, taking my own recordings and chopping and screwing them and bending them and morphing the audio. So with "Chiron's Theme," that was the first evolution of the track. There was this idea that the key would get lower as the film progressed, it would deepen. So, whereas it's in D major in the beginning in chapter one,

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: in chapter two, it's in B major.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: It's not played lower, it's actually chopped and screwed. So there's this, that's the audio, actually, is bent lower.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: That violin, it's not like Tim played it in that key, that's actually the "Little's Theme" violin, but just pitched down.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: I actually used an algorithm, you know, I sort of experiment with a lot of different pitch shifting algorithms. It's just something fun that I [laughter] spent probably far too much time doing, but over the years, I've found algorithms that work better than others.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: The quote, "Chopped and Screwed Chiron's Theme," which is in the school yard fight, that's a full chop and screw where it's pitched down and slowed down.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: I took "Chiron's Theme" and slowed it way, way down. It's over two octaves down. And then I actually layered in a copy of itself on top of itself and ran those two through this vinyl filter. So you're hearing this crackle and then you're feeling this kind of rumbling.

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: That bell is actually the piano from "Little's Theme," and what sounds like a bass is actually the violin from "Little's Theme."

*("Little's Theme" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

*(Music ends)*

Nicholas: In Chapter 3, Black's theme is actually in A major, cello octet. There's cellos playing some tremolo where the bow is shaking back and forth.

*(Tremolo Cellos)*

Nicholas: Pizzicato cellos, where they pluck the strings.

*(Pizzicato Cellos)*

Nicholas: And then there are cellos playing Arco with the bow, playing the music of “Little’s Theme.”

*(Arco Cellos)*

Nicholas: That track, I recorded it in D major. So in the same key as the very beginning of “Little’s Theme,” and then I took that track as a master and pitched it down.

*(Cellos)*

Nicholas: The sound of the cellos is fascinatingly changed, where they don't really sound like cellos to me, but they also don't really sound like basses either, they sound like some sort of hybrid string instrument. So that's where “Black’s Theme” exists, it's a different orchestration, a different key, and then applying the chop and screw technique to it.

*(Cellos)*

Nicholas: With all of these ideas, what was so exciting for me as a composer was that Barry was 100 percent into trying all of this out.

*(“Little’s Theme” by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: For me, one of the amazing things about the film scoring experience is that I think you really never know how things are going to turn out or work.

*(“Little’s Theme” by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Nicholas: There's this fascinating alchemy of how sound and picture relate. And I don't think anyone really knows why these things feel the way they do. So, you know, the more I get the opportunity to do this, the more I feel it's important to follow these kinds of instincts and feelings and let your emotional response to things drive you in different directions.

*(“Little’s Theme” by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, from *Moonlight*, here's "Little's Theme," "Chiron's Theme," and "Black's Theme," by Nicholas Britell, in their entirety.

*("Moonlight" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to watch the trailer for *Moonlight* and for a link to buy the film soundtrack.

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*("Blood" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)*

Hrishikesh: You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Blood" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)*

*(Music fades)*