

**Song Exploder**  
**Stranger Things - Main Title Theme**  
**Episode 121**

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.

*("Stranger Things (Main Title Theme)" by KYLE DIXON & MICHAEL STEIN)*

Hrishikesh: The show *Stranger Things* is a Netflix original series. The first season was released in July 2016. Season two's release date: October 27, 2017. After the first season, the show was nominated for 18 Emmys, and won the Emmy for Outstanding Original Main Title Theme Music. The theme music, along with the rest of the show's score, was composed by Michael Stein and Kyle Dixon of the band S U R V I V E. In this episode, they break down how they made that main title theme. *Stranger Things* was created by Matt and Ross Duffer AKA The Duffer Brothers. And the story begins with an email the Duffer Brothers sent to Michael and Kyle.

*("Stranger Things (Main Title Theme)" by KYLE DIXON & MICHAEL STEIN)*

Michael: My name's Michael Stein.

Kyle: Hi, I'm Kyle Dixon.

*(Music fades out)*

Michael: We are in a band called S U R V I V E, and the Duffers reached out to us because they used our music in a mock trailer when they were pitching the TV show.

*("Dirge" by S U R V I V E)*

Kyle: The Duffers used a song called "Dirge."

*("Dirge" by S U R V I V E)*

Michael: It's the closing track of our first full length.

Kyle: The Duffers reached out through email. This would have been 2015. It was out of the blue. Just a random email with some cool words in it like Netflix,

Michael: Sci-fi, horror,

Kyle: Winona Ryder.

Michael: And, are you interested in scoring it?

Kyle: Of course, we were interested because it's like, "Oh this looks perfect."

Michael: They pitched to a lot of different networks for a while with this mock trailer, and I'm really glad it got picked up by Netflix, just because of the kind of freedom and control they gave a new set of directors, to go pick out a new set of composers, and just be like, "Just do your thing."

*(Music fades out)*

Kyle: I think it was a Friday night, and the email came and I saw it and I was just, "OK, I'm not doing anything tonight [laughter], I'm going through the library and finding stuff [laughter] to send over to them."

Michael: Yeah I think it was that evening we collected about 50 things from our little library that we were like, "OK, from this small bit of criteria, this is what we're going to send them." And we're like, "What do you think of this stuff?"

Kyle: They were very excited to get that much music like almost immediately,

Michael: [laughter]

Kyle: so we made a good impact by doing that.

Hrishikesh: Kyle and Michael started their work on the show by scoring individual episodes, making tracks like this one for specific scenes.

*("After Sarah" by KYLE DIXON & MICHAEL STEIN)*

Kyle: We didn't start working on pitching ideas for the theme until we had maybe done two or three episodes.

*(Music fades out)*

Kyle: And actually we didn't even know if we were going to be doing the theme song. There's a lot of shows that will have just something completely different than the score as the main title. But they pretty much decided somewhere around halfway through or a little before that, that they wanted us to do something, so we sent them a handful of ideas.

Michael: We made a couple sketches for the theme. And then they were like, "You know, what? What about this thing?"

*("Stranger Things (Main Title Theme)" Demo)*

Michael: from the 50 things we sent over on day one.

*(Demo)*

Kyle: It was just a random library piece that we didn't even consider.

*(Demo)*

Kyle: But it had the vibe that they wanted.

Michael: And they were like, "Expand on this."

*(Demo fades out)*

Michael: We actually reworked it. Nothing was resampled. It was all remade fresh.

*(Synth)*

Kyle: One of the most important things for the theme was to have kind of a mysterious aspect. A little bit ominous.

*(Synth)*

Michael: And then, there is a little piano line.

*(Piano)*

Michael: It's just a little, really mellow piano sound on a Prophet 5.

Kyle: The Prophet 5 is an old synthesizer,

Michael: From the 70s. That was one of the most commonly used in pop music.

*(Prophet 5 synth)*

Kyle: And lots of movie scores too.

Michael: John Carpenter used it.

*(Prophet 5 synth)*

*(Mellotron synth)*

Michael: And that stab sound is a Mellotron. This is the fundamental bedding of the track, and there's two chords basically. And those were the chords that the bass line followed.

*(Bass synth)*

Michael: The bass line is this Roland SH-2.

*(Bass synth)*

Kyle: The Roland SH-2 is a great go-to for a big, epic bass line.

Michael: The bass becomes one of the most dynamic parts of that composition because you open the filter a lot. You want something to get energy and you open it so it lets more harmonics through,

*(Processed bass)*

Michael: so it sounds like someone's playing harder.

*(Processed bass)*

Kyle: If you're playing a guitar and you're about to switch into another part of the song, you can actually start strumming harder, and it kind of adds a little bit of momentum to get you into the next part. There's ways you can do that with acoustic instruments that are not as easy to do with synthesizers, so you have to make up for that by doing other things.

Michael: So the filter opens and opens more and more.

*(Processed bass)*

Kyle: We had the bass line and we had the sequence, and it just felt like it needed something to propel it forward a little more.

*(Beat)*

Michael: That's a Sequential Circuits Pro One, and it's just the filter kind of opens and closes and it sounds like a heartbeat.

Kyle: It's not a four on the floor like, doo doo doo.

*(Four on the floor beat)*

Kyle: If you double up and you get the heartbeat,

*(Beat)*

Kyle: It kind of sets the tone, and it doesn't feel as straightforward, and it alludes to suspense or fear so I think it was a really appropriate way to get percussion into the theme.

*(Beat ends)*

Kyle: The hardest part I think was definitely doing all [laughter] the edits to make it fit with the picture. So the company, Imaginary Forces, did the title sequence.

Michael: And they actually had the video done before they finalized the audio, so they were like, "You need to make the music to the final changes."

Kyle: There were some interesting timings because of the title cards. And that's kind of where sound effects come in for us.

Michael: So most of those happen every time they change a card.

Kyle: So whenever someone's name is revealed,

Michael: there's like these little accent stabs.

*(Synth chord)*

Michael: It would have said like, "Winona Ryder," and then

*(Synth chord)*

Michael: "Matthew Modine." All the sound effects are in tune with the music and basically mimicking harmony.

*(Sound effects)*

Michael: You want them to sound like music too.

*(Sound effects)*

*(Sound effects end)*

Michael: At the very beginning, there's this arpeggiator that's really high octaves, it's kind of does this sparkling.

Kyle: Yeah, it has some noise in it and it kind of, [mimics sound effect].

*("Spiders" sound effect)*

Kyle: We called it spiders. Because it kind of sounds like a spider scurrying [mimics sound effect].

Michael: [laughter]

Kyle: You know.

*(Synth pad)*

Michael: There's a climactic moment. Weird stuff slowly combining and building with sound effects and swooshes,

*(Sound effects join)*

Michael: filter closes, sound effects come up,

*(Sound effects increase in volume)*

Michael: and then it hits this big mellotron stab.

*(Mellotron synth and beat join)*

Michael: And that's the biggest moment. When they drop

*(Beat)*

Michael: the actual title, *Stranger Things*.

*(Beat ends)*

Kyle: It's hard to say how long it took to make the theme because we did most of the work in a day or two, but to finish it and get it lined up with all the sound effects right and everything like that took, I don't even know. We were doing it up until the very end.

*(Piano)*

Kyle: I still haven't watched it. When you're working on something for a while, you kind of get a little desensitized to the quality of it? I mean if I had tried to watch it, I waited a few months and I was like, "Yeah, I'll watch this show, and I started to watch the first episode and it was all so familiar, I'm like, "Why am I doing this? I know this so well."

*(Synth joins)*

Michael: I did watch it, but it was still, I wasn't far enough removed from it. I was thinking about the mix and like, "I can't really hear that one!" I was like, "What cue is that?" And I was like, I can't enjoy this the way I should be able to.

Kyle: But it didn't take very long to realize that the show was doing well. This show came out on a Friday and then basically everybody that we knew was getting in contact and telling us, "Oh my God!"

Michael: People were telling us it was huge.

Kyle: Everybody was very surprised. It was like, "I saw your name on this TV show, is that actually you?" [laughter] And we're like, "Yep, that's us!"

*(Bass synth joins)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the Main Title Theme to *Stranger Things*, by Michael Stein & Kyle Dixon, in its entirety.

*("Stranger Things (Main Title Theme)" by KYLE DIXON & MICHAEL STEIN)*

Hrishikesh: For more information on Michael Stein, Kyle Dixon, S U R V I V E, and *Stranger Things*, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). There's a great feature about the making of the visuals for the opening titles, on the site, "Art of the Title." And I've posted a link to that on the website too.

Song Exploder's produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find every episode of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or wherever you download podcasts. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, @SongExploder. Let me know what you think of this episode. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.