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Things That Stuck: *The Mandalorian's* Composer on the Second Season and His New Sonos Radio Station

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While the Emmy-winning score Ludwig Göransson composed for *The Mandalorian* is meant to evoke the lone man's journey, his own path has been enriched by long-term friendships (Ryan Coogler, Donald Glover), fruitful collaborations (Jon Favreau, Christopher Nolan), and an eagerness to incorporate an international array of musical cultures, styles, and expressions into his life and work. From embracing organic, tactile instruments he learned to play as a child to collaborating with Sonos's engineering team to tune Arc, Göransson is passionate about all aspects of sound. His new station on Sonos Radio, Things That Stuck, debuts today. In this interview, he shares what inspired his station, how he knew he was going to win the Academy Award moments before his name was called, and why he's so excited for Season 2 of *The Mandalorian*.

The moment he finally heard the orchestra play the score he'd written for the first season of *The Mandalorian* was a special one for Ludwig Göransson. "With the orchestra, it's the first time that it comes to life," he said. "You have 70 or 80 of the best musicians in the world playing together, breathing together, putting their efforts into their instruments. And that's when it starts to feel human." Up until that moment, he'd cultivated the music mostly on his own, tending to it like a caregiver. In the case of *The Mandalorian*, he worked on the score for seven months before sessions with the orchestra began. There were lofty expectations. The music for the first live-action *Star Wars* series needed to complement Jon Favreau's unique vision for the show, while also standing alongside John Williams's revered score for the original films. So the moment when it all came together with an orchestra was significant. "I think it's the closest I will get to delivering a baby," he said.

Like much of Göransson's career, what happened next is more collaborative. "One of the most fun parts of the process is being in the room with the orchestra and shaping it into something you didn't know existed, something you didn't think it could sound like," he said. "You can take an idea and—if you work with a great orchestra—you can give them the story and tell them what the music is supposed to mean and then you hear it shape their performance."

Emoting Through Music

The *Star Wars* universe has defined "the future" since Göransson was a kid. But when it came time for him to score for *The Mandalorian*, he intentionally chose a more organic approach. "I wanted to connect with the feeling I had as a kid when I watched *Star Wars* for the first time," he said. "The only way to come back to that feeling was to step away from the computer and use real instruments, instruments I could touch." Göransson started with one familiar to many who took a music class in school—the bass woodwind recorder. "It had this really unique sound that I was instantly drawn to," he said. "So I started improvising on that for a day and those are the very first notes you hear in *The Mandalorian* theme."

Based on his initial conversations with Favreau, Göransson knew the series should sound evocative of a lone journeyer. So, Göransson went on a journey himself, spending hours alone in a studio filled with instruments. "I wanted the music to be very direct and intimate. And I wanted it to feel small in the beginning. After arriving at the recorder riff, I got the idea to put a heartbeat under it. So I went to the drum and added a heartbeat sound. Next I went to the piano and wrote the bassline. Then I went to my electric guitar and wrote the first melody with some distortion. I basically was closed off in my studio for a month, jumping from instrument to instrument."

While music is integral to any property in the *Star Wars* universe, it's even more critical in context of *The Mandalorian*. "The score is the facial expressions of the Mandalorian," Göransson said. "You never see his face because he's always covered with a helmet. You only hear his voice and see his body language. So the score is extremely important in telling the story of what he's feeling."

To ensure that his score blended seamlessly with the high-tech look and feel of the series, Göransson worked closely with the sound team. "To me, sound and music go hand in hand," he said. "With today's technology, we can manipulate sounds. We can take something that everyone's familiar with, like the clanking of the Mandalorian's boots, for example, and we can turn that into a music element. There's so many ways to use new technology with sound and turn sounds into music, which gives the listeners and audience a new and different experience, something they've never heard before."

Göransson's own excitement for the second season of the series is palpable. "We're going to go to so many more places," he said. "We're going to meet so many new characters and see things we've never seen or experienced before. So you know you're about to go on a really fun ride."

Collaborating Through Music

One of Göransson's first big jobs in Hollywood was scoring the NBC series *Community*. While working on the show, he became close with Donald Glover, one of the stars of the series. Glover was impressed by Göransson's classical and jazz background and they started working together on music for Glover's alter ego, Childish Gambino. The collaboration would go on to net four Grammys for the song "This Is America" and its accompanying music video.

Besides winning him awards, the breadth of Göransson's oeuvre has also had a major influence on his unique film scores. "I bring insights from everything I do into scoring. There are ideas in producing a record, for example, that I can bring with me into films. I like how you can blend worlds together and make it feel new."

The partnership that would eventually result in Göransson's Academy Award began even earlier than his collaboration with Glover. While attending USC's screen scoring program, Göransson connected with director and fellow USC student Ryan Coogler over a game of pool at a party. The two hit it off while discussing their favorite Swedish hip-hop artists and Coogler asked Göransson to score his student film *Locks*. Göransson would go on to score two more Coogler films that were more high-profile: 2013's *Fruitvale Station* and 2018's *Black Panther*. Göransson said, "I've been fortunate that every project I work on, I get to learn so many new things. I'm inspired by something new each time. For example, on *Black Panther*, I didn't only learn new music, but I also learned about the meaning of music in relationship to African culture. I made lifelong friends with a lot of the performers that played on the score that I'm still talking to every week, learning what music means to them. Music has brought me so many new friendships and opened up my world in ways I never could have expected."

Göransson's work on *Black Panther* earned him his first Oscar. Although completely surprised by the honor, he had the tiniest inkling that the statuette would be his moments before his name was called. "The people giving out the award were Tessa Thompson and Michael B. Jordan, who I'd worked with on *Creed*," he said, referring to the 2015 film he scored. "I actually remember I saw their reaction when they opened the envelope so I had a hint that I won. It was surreal."

Conversing Through Music

"The station is, in a way, the amalgamation of the musical experiences that have led me to this moment in my journey as an artist," Göransson said, referring to his new station on Sonos Radio, Things That Stuck. Göransson's wide-ranging taste in music made him a perfect fit to curate a station for Sonos Radio. "What's been so important to me is that I've been introduced to so many different genres, styles, and kinds of music from all different parts of the world," he said. "And I think I was open to that because I met people that I created a bond with, and when you create a bond with someone, you listen to what they have to say in a different way. I listened to their music and it helped shape me into the composer I am and the person I've become." He continues, "So there's all different genres of music on Things That Stuck and it's a bit all over the place. And I guess that tells you something about the music that I'm writing, too. I'm trying to cross genres and combine different instruments you're not particularly used to. I love experimenting with that."

Things That Stuck offers up a blend of the music that has influenced Göransson's work, artists he's produced, and the songs that have inspired him personally. The station ranges from classical, jazz, and film scores to indie and hard rock. "It's the sounds and songs and melodies that are stuck in my hippocampus," he said. "It's part of my language. It's things that, from the beginning, were passed to me through my father because that's how I got introduced to music. Also, songs and artists from social experiences, like meeting friends, having a band, or sitting with my best friend, playing music for each other in the living room or the car because that's where the good sound system was." Upon its wider release, the second season soundtrack from *The Mandalorian* will debut on Things That Stuck, alongside exclusive behind-the-scenes commentary from Göransson.

Göransson's long-standing relationship with Sonos is rooted in his appreciation for sound. "So much of the experience when you watch a film is in the sound, obviously," he said. "I learned that through a lot of the directors I work with, how important the sound is to them. And that's really been affecting my career too." While near the final stages of tuning Arc, Sonos invited Göransson to offer his feedback on how our newest soundbar was handling his Oscar-winning score for *Black Panther*. Göransson wanted to first hone in on one particular scene—the fight scene at the waterfall between T'Challa and Killmonger. "It was one of the most complicated scenes I remember mixing at the dub station," he said. "You have a thunderous, bass-heavy waterfall going on throughout the whole fight, hundreds of people in the audience, the score, and sound effects throughout the whole scene. So how can you make all those sounds distinct? [While testing out Arc], we played that scene over and over again and it was interesting how the Sonos engineers could make adjustments to Arc on the spot. In the end, it felt to me like there was a real waterfall behind the TV and the music was out in front. It came together in a way I haven't heard before on a TV."

Connecting Through Music

In addition to hearing Göransson's score throughout the second season of *The Mandalorian*, you can also hear his music in Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*. Like many of his collaborations before, Göransson established a common language and trust with the celebrated director through music. "With *Tenet*, I read the script and then I had a meeting with Chris [Nolan] where I got to ask him a bunch of stuff," he said. "One of the things that we did in our first meeting was to play music for each other—he played music that had inspired him and I played music that inspired me throughout my life. Having that conversation and playing music was extremely helpful in getting to know each other. And that became the foundation of our collaboration."

While he doesn't have an orchestra at his disposal when he's at home, music infuses his personal life as well. "There's always music in our house. My wife Serena is a violinist and she's always playing or we're playing songs for our one-year-old," he said. "Music is constantly talked about and around us all the time."

Experience the vivid musical landscape inside Ludwig Göransson's head by listening to Things That Stuck, now available on Sonos Radio. And watch the new season of *The Mandalorian* on Disney+ starting October 30.

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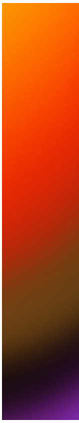

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