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Behind the Scenes

How guitarist and composer Snuffy Walden creates the music for top TV series and films.

By Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers

"I was the right guy in the right place at the right time with the exact, perfect lack of chops," says W.G. Snuffy Walden with a laugh, recalling the moment 20 years ago when he borrowed an acoustic guitar to write cues for a new TV series called *thirtysomething*. At the time, Walden was a seasoned electric player—he'd toured with Chaka Khan and others—but he had never studied composition or orchestration and didn't even read or write music. "If you'd put a gun to my head when I was doing *thirtysomething* and said, 'Write an orchestral cue with flutes and oboes,' you'd have had to shoot me, because I couldn't do it. All I could do was play guitar to picture until something happened."

Something definitely happened. In 1988, *thirtysomething* and *The Wonder Years*, both featuring Walden's acoustic guitar, won Emmy awards, helping to popularize guitar-oriented scores in a field long dominated by orchestral music. At the same time, the computer revolution gave unschooled composers like Walden powerful tools for capturing and developing their ideas in home studios. In the years since, Walden has scored dozens of TV series and movies, from *Felicity* to *Ellen* to *The West Wing* (for which his first-ever orchestral theme won an Emmy) to his current projects, *Friday Night Lights* and *In Plain Sight*.

Though Walden had no formal training for this career, he found film scoring surprisingly similar to the role he'd played in bands as "the color guy." He says, "When I look at picture and play guitar, it's really coloring the emotion. The picture is leading me. It's like having a drummer and bass player and keyboard player who already have the chart, and I'm just trying to feel along with it."

So what's it like to work in such a high-profile yet behind-the-scenes music career? Every project is different, Walden says, but here he shares the basic steps of scoring a series like *Friday Night Lights*.

Spotting the Show

Walden and the producers start with a "spotting meeting," during which they go through the film and decide where music is needed and what it should accomplish. "I try to get producers and directors to talk about the emotion they're trying to create in a scene, or what they want to stress or what they want softened," he says. "Am I supporting the emotion, or am I playing against it? You could take a scene where someone's child dies, and play a theme with that. You can have a happy scene later on in the movie where everybody is out at a picnic, but if you play this same theme, you create a bittersweet longing—you're playing against the happiness of this moment. Musically, you can recall the prior emotion of loss."

Spotting meeting discussions can be vague or even misleading, he says—especially when producers and directors lack the reference points to describe the music they're imagining. Sometimes, he says, "they say they want swamp music but really what they mean is a classical horn section. It's my job to sort that out."

After the spotting session, the show's music editor prepares spotting notes for Walden that include the start and end of every cue (in SMPTE time code) and notes about the musical approach. This is Walden's map for scoring the show.

The Sketch

From there, Walden heads to his home studio. He's surrounded by four screens: a big one for watching the film, two for sequencers, and one that switches between four computers.

His first move is to sync up the film with his sequencer so that he can demo his ideas for the producer or director at the same time that he's making them up. The ability to make efficient, effective demos of the music with the film is essential, he says. "If you have to go in a studio with an engineer and get performances every time, you're going to spend a lot of money and a lot of time recording what you've already written. Everybody is expected to do demos, and at their own cost."

With *Friday Night Lights*, he says, "Because it's a guitar show, most of the time I'm sitting here playing guitar into [Mark of the Unicorn's] Digital Performer. On that particular show I use acoustic and electric guitars with a lot of delays and real washy, ambient music, and I'll just start playing to picture." As he works on the sketch, Walden often uses editing tools to move sound and to compress or stretch time. "In my job," he says, "the key is to make sure I'm breathing with the film. I have to help the arc of a scene much more than I need to play some cool licks. So it has to be malleable."

Once Walden has a compositional sketch in mind, he'll focus on the sonics—choosing instruments and effects and sometimes layering many guitar parts into what he calls a "wire choir."

The Performance

Walden's home studio is his writing space. He has a separate studio that's optimized for recording, with a big tracking room, isolation booths, and a Euphonics console. This dual-studio setup reflects his belief that writing and performing are, in his words, "two different head spaces."

In the case of *Friday Night Lights*, about half of the music Walden sketches out is rerecorded by another guitarist, Bruce Watson, working with composer Bennett Salvay. In other shows, Walden plays all the guitar tracks, as he did on his breakthrough *thirtysomething* score. But even if he's playing the final tracks, he sketches the music first, then polishes up the recorded performance.

The Mix

The final stage is a mixing session with an engineer. "I'll have maybe eight mono tracks, four stereo pairs," Walden says, "so once they get to the dub they can blend it so that it works best with their effects and their dialogue."

This whole process is, needless to say, intensely collaborative, with lots of ideas sketched and discarded along the way. The ultimate goal, he says, is far different from expressing yourself on a solo record. "What I'm trying to get is an emotional resonance that keeps the viewer inside the story. As soon as somebody's more aware of what I'm doing than they are of the story, then I've kind of defeated the producer's purpose. I want to do something different and special that stands alone, but at the same time if I sabotage the story by expressing myself as an artist, I'm not doing the job that's being asked of me. So it's a fine line, and one that I don't always succeed at, but I try."

Snuffy Walden's Equipment Picks

For acoustic recording with microphones, Walden's main guitars are a 1946 herringbone Martin D-28, a Collings 000-2H, and a 1923 Washburn parlor guitar he often uses for slide. All are recorded with Schoeps mics.

For recording directly into the computer, he plays Taylors: a koa cutaway K22ce with the Expression pickup system, a 912c, and a thin-line koa T5-C2.

Also in his studio are: Beltona electro-resonator and Donmo "rustbucket" resonator guitars; a Gibson Chet Atkins CE electric nylon-string; a 1957 Gibson Les Paul gold-top; a 1960 Gibson ES-335; a Paul Reed Smith 513 custom; four Fender Stratocasters (two from 1958, one from 1960, and one 1999 American); and a four-string Tune Bass Maniac, circa 1987.

The point of having all these axes at hand, he says, is "so I can grab different guitars for different textures. The note

is one thing; the sound is totally different. Something that might sound kind of dumb on a Tele might sound great on a Dobro. I use the color as much as I use the notes. It's kind of like casting actors.”

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