

## Pacific Overtures, Part 1

Blake Neely and Geoff Zanelli discuss their massive collaboration with Hans Zimmer on the HBO miniseries *The Pacific*.

Interview by Tim Greiving



*The Pacific*, the acclaimed HBO miniseries about the American-Japanese conflict in World War II, required more than four hours of music for its 10 poignant episodes. The men for the task were longtime collaborators Blake Neely (who worked with Michael Kamen on *Band of Brothers* as an orchestrator), Geoff Zanelli (who scored the miniseries *Into the West* for *Pacific* producer Steven Spielberg), and Hans Zimmer (some German dude who writes film music).

Neely and Zanelli had much to say about the harrowing series, the rewarding collaboration, and the very nature of collaboration itself.

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**Tim Greiving:** I've really been enjoying the *The Pacific* score album.

**Geoff Zanelli:** Thank you.

**Blake Neely:** Thanks. It's definitely one of the projects I've done that I'm the most proud of. It was also the most difficult, for reasons beyond the writing, just the story itself and how emotionally attached we all got to the characters. We were going through it as they were going through it in the writing.

**GZ:** Yeah, you're not immune to what the story does to you just because you've watched a scene a hundred times. It's almost magnified compared to what a normal viewer goes through, because we lived those scenes over and over and over. I think they've only aired four episodes so far, but as you get deeper into the series it just gets heavy and it weighs on you. It weighed on both of us.

**BN:** The thing is, in all film scoring you usually see not just the film itself but each scene 40 or 45 times, just to get it right. And like you said, Geoff, you don't become immune to it. We would become even more attached, to the point where that thing that we had tried and were in love with, we would throw it out. We'd call each other and say, 'I've got a better idea for this scene now, and we can make it even harder to watch' [*laughing*]. So instead of getting bored with it—and there are projects that I work on where I actually get bored every time I see the scene—this I just got more and more excited, and more and more

invested. I think Geoff had the same thing. We had a hard time when this ended, just coming back to reality and putting *The Pacific* behind us.

**GZ:** I'm not convinced that it is behind us. I'm watching the show again, as a fan now. If you think about it, boy, we started in December of 2008, I think...

**BN:** Even September. I was working in September 2008. I'm having the opposite effect, too. Some Sundays, I can't make myself watch it, because I just think, 'I've seen it. I don't know if tonight I feel up to watching it and getting into that world again.' It's weird. It's a weird project, and for those reasons why it's so difficult emotionally. We got so attached.



**Sans Baton:** Blake Neely conducting.

**TG:** When did you guys wrap your work on it?

**GZ:** What was it, August?

**BN:** It was almost exactly a year. We had our first meetings—both Geoff and I got a copy of the early version of the show in September of '08, and had meetings and began writing themes and trying to find a sound, something, a voice for the show. And it was August of '09 that we had our last session and the thing print-mastered.

**TG:** And did they come to you in episodes?

**BN:** What happened was, Hans Zimmer obviously got the call, the powerhouse that he is. And from the early days he pulled me and Geoff in for various reasons, and we were all going to do this as a team. So it was always going to be a team effort.

**GZ:** But in terms of how we did it, we did watch the entire show, at least in a rough state, before any of us wrote a note. We had actually seen a rough edit of episodes one through 10. So it was a little bit less like a TV series, where you might see episode five while they're shooting episode six. It was not like that.

**BN:** Yeah, we could see the entire thing. They were changing it, and they were revising the edits, but we had a pretty good idea of the scope of the project.

**TG:** They'd already shot the whole thing.

**BN:** Yeah, and then for several months we literally just went away from picture and wrote themes and ideas, and tried things that might work for the show before we ever started writing to picture or writing for a particular episode. That was a good thing, because then we could trade off ideas. One thing that we thought the very first meeting was, 'It's easy: We've got three main characters and three composers; we'll each take a character.' It'd be really simplistic to say that's how it evolved; it just didn't work. It's more like we approached certain sequences. It'd be this whole arc in this show I have an idea for, so I'd take it. Or Geoff would do the same thing; 'I have an idea for this arc,' and he would take that.

**GZ:** And even for some of the same characters. I think a good example would probably be Eugene Sledge, one of the soldiers in the show. Blake has a story arc that goes all the way across episode one all the way to 10, which is...

**BN:** ...his whole home-front thing, and with his family. I took that arc where, when he gets to the Peleliu hills Geoff has this whole thing that starts and takes him all through that sequence. And interspersed in there you have some of Hans' themes as well, so it's really interesting how our first ideas didn't work for how we were going to divide the show up.



Enjoying *The Pacific*: Geoff Zanelli poses.

**GZ:** For half a day we thought, 'We'll just alternate episodes.' But I think you can see, when you watch the show, that it doesn't really work unless the episodes focus [on one thing.] Like episode two, for instance, is very focused on Basilone, and so that can be done from one perspective. But a lot of the episodes, one of us might have a certain story arc and the other might have another within the same episode.

**BN:** We thought what we'd do was just work on every episode all the way through. And then, like Geoff said, there were four episodes, like episode two and eight, that are very specific to John Basilone, and I had this whole thing going for Basilone, so I took those episodes. And then, for instance, episodes six and nine are very specific to Eugene during his Peleliu and his descent into and out of humanity, sort of, and Geoff had his whole thing going, so he took those episodes. Then the rest of it we just split up, and I don't really remember how we split it up, Geoff. We'd basically say, 'I have an idea for this,' and so he'd grab

that scene, or I'd grab a scene. It just kind of evolved. At one point we were writing on top of each other; we would sit back and say, 'Which one works best?'

**GZ:** There was a little bit of that. Then as we got deeper into the show, we honed in on which aspects of the show each of us were telling. But in the beginning, when we were trying to find the voice, well then there's nothing wrong with us each trying to find the voice. That's kind of why there were three of us.

**BN:** We had a really great guiding hand in Gary Goetzman, the producer. He's got a very strong musical knowledge, experience, and opinion. And he would hear something that I was working on and say, 'Hey buddy, I think what you're going for might work for this part of the film.' (We always refer to this 10-part miniseries as 'the film.') So I would go address that. Or he would hear something Geoff had written and say, 'Wouldn't that be great in this sequence?' So we weren't totally alone in this decision-making process.

**TG:** So what exactly was Hans' role in this?

**BN:** When we started this, we all suspected he was going to write some themes and we were going to [score it]. We've done this before, where he wrote a bunch of themes and we scored it. But once we got into it, we were all writing themes. And it was really like, where does it work?

**GZ:** One of the first things Hans did was he'd written I think it was a 10- or 12-minute suite of really dark, dark music that we tried all over the place. For a second we tried it as the main title, but it was really heavy. It actually ends up being a pivotal sequence on Iwo Jima—it's at least based on that. He was involved in that sense; he was involved in defining the tone of certain parts of the story. But like Blake said—let's just be wide open—Hans was rather busy with *Angels & Demons* during certain parts of this, and so there were times when the burden was really on Blake's and my shoulders.



**BN:** It's interesting. At first when we heard it, we weren't able to find places for this massive suite that he'd written, because it was really dark. If you listen to the [Iwo Jima sequence](#), I basically just took what he'd done and reshaped it to make it work for the scene. But it's classic Hans: a dark, very brooding type of thing. It was really cool. I think that by us not being able to find a lot of places for it to go, we sort of forgot the importance of what it did. Some of the hardest things we had to do were the battle sequences. And so when we would get to [those] sequences, we would find that this tone, whether it was the exact music

or not, really sent us in a good direction. Hans is a master at doing that, at finding a tone that you can then run off in your own ways and work with.

**TG:** And you guys have both done that, in some capacity, in the past, right?

**GZ:** Oh yeah.

**BN:** Oh yeah, of course. [*Laughing*] How many times, Geoff? But then, you know, other things would happen. We thought originally it'd be a cool idea for all of us to write the main title together, and it'd be like a suite of ideas, or the end titles, or what have you. Those things just came about. I remember I was working on another sequence in the film, and Gary said, 'I think that might be the [main title theme](#).' The exact same thing happened with the end titles. Geoff was working on it for somewhere else, and it became, 'You know, if that was expanded, that could be the [end title](#).' It's really interesting how this stuff evolved.

**GZ:** I think that touches on what Blake was saying, about Gary's hand in all of this. The movie producer tends to be listed as a producer of the score in some cases. In this case it's so deserved, because every note went through his ear. And, just to be frank, he solved a lot of big questions. What's the main title? Well, Gary said here it is, it's this thing. So he really did have a—I like the phrase that Blake used—he had a very guiding hand for how the music was used in the show.



**Pacific Producers:** Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg and Gary Goetzman.

**BN:** What I liked was, it was a great leveler. Because when you have three composers—let's face it, we're all artists, and we're creative, and we're feisty, and we fight for what we believe in—but we tried, even with the three of us, we really tried to leave ego at the door. And Gary and Tom [Hanks] and all of them could guide and just say, 'Listen, I like what you're doing, but it works here.' It was really nice, because we could have fought through the whole process, but instead we were supportive through the whole process. It wasn't like, 'I got the big spot,' or 'I got the small spot.' We were just making a film together.

**GZ:** And I think a film like this has so many big spots that, you know, no one's left out. Like Hans obviously has that big scene in Iwo Jima, and there's the main title that Blake did, and the end title that I did. There's a whole bunch of

places to hang your hat, let's put it that way.

**BN:** Even along that line, I remember talking to Hans when they were talking about using this theme that I had started for the main title at one point. I had concerns about it. Hans said, 'Main title, end title, Iwo Jima, who cares? We need to just make this film.' So it was really one of those leave your ego at the door and do the work, and do the best you can. Hopefully it came out that way.

**TG:** I'm surprised at how seamless it is, just the album experience. There are no jarring delineations of tone or anything. You guys really did a good job of melding your different styles into one unified style.

**BN:** I've thought about that, and why that worked, and I think it comes down to we were open to producing and letting each other produce our own material, with an eye always on, 'Does it sound too much like Blake? Does it sound too much like Hans? Does it sound too much like Geoff?' Remember that discussion we had the night before we recorded episode five, Geoff? We were like, 'Well, if you took that out, then it sounds more like the movie.' We'd have discussions like that.

**GZ:** The other thing is, Blake conducted every note of the score, and I was in the booth during the recording of every note of the score. So you had all four of our ears always focused on what was going on. And Hans was there for a great deal of it, too. So even as late as while we were recording things, Hans and I'd come in and go, 'Hey, what if it was just a solo cello here?' Or Blake might have an idea on one of my cues, and vice versa. I think that smoothed it out a little bit.

**BN:** I think it's pretty much, stylistically, an Americana-sounding score, and I love writing that type of music; Geoff does, too; Hans does, too. And it helps that you have the same players every week, so they're playing it the same. That's how you get this unified sound. I think it also helped that we didn't do the episodes in order. In one session we might record a cue from episode one, four from episode five, and two from episode ten. So it was always cohesive.

**GZ:** The other thing is, because it's a 10-hour movie there's a lot more space for there to be a few different voices. I think if it was one episode of a TV show and there were three composers, you might really feel it. But because there's 10 hours of stuff, and each of the story arcs is being handled from beginning to end by one of us, that's another reason why it's so cohesive.

**TG:** Blake, you worked with Michael Kamen in the past—even on *Band of Brothers*, right?

**BN:** Yeah, I was an orchestrator on *Band of Brothers*. And for one brief stint played the timpani [*laughing*].

**GZ:** [*Laughing*] Did you really?

**BN:** Yeah, there was a day when the timpanist had to leave early, and we had to record this thing. So I just snuck out and played the timpani. I won't say where because it will always stick out as a sore thumb if I tell you where. But yeah, I worked with Michael for many years. He's responsible for getting me into the business, actually. And I'd also worked with Playtone; this was my seventh project with Playtone. I had not worked with HBO. Geoff and I had worked together many times in the past, and we've both worked with Hans many times in the past.

**GZ:** In my case, I was brought on because I had prior miniseries experience with Steven Spielberg, having scored *Into the West* for him a few years ago. I know that he was a fan of my score for that, and that made it easy for me to get his support. I had also worked with HBO before on *Live From Baghdad*, which was an additional music job I did for Steve Jablonsky. I think the team got assembled that way—Hans getting the initial call, and Blake's work on *Band of Brothers*, combined with mine on *Into the West* made it all gel.

**TG:** Did Kamen's work on *Band of Brothers* influence the score for *The Pacific* in any way?

**BN:** We intentionally did not want this to be a *Band of Brothers* sequel. Everyone tries to say it's a *Band of Brothers* sequel. It's a companion piece. I think if anything similar, I'm more to blame probably than the other two, because I find that Kamen sneaks out of me a lot anyway, his influences. But we were very careful, and that's another spot where Tony [To, co-executive producer] and Gary and Tom, and the ones who also worked on *Band of Brothers*, could say to us—I remember even one meeting where it was like, 'Uh, that sounds a little *Band of Brothers*-ish...let's steer clear from that.' So, no. Kamen's masterful work at how he approached the *Band of Brothers* miniseries, I think, was more influential than the actual music. I tried to take some of the things that he had talked about while we were doing *Band of Brothers*—you know, how you approach war scenes musically or not approach it, where to use thematic material, that kind of stuff. But we really tried to make our own thing with *The Pacific*.

**GZ:** And I guess for all of us—I don't mean to speak for Blake or Hans—but other than the fact that it's guys in uniforms fighting a war, this sounds naïve, but I don't really think it's that similar to *Band of Brothers*. I think as you get deeper into the series, you'll see why I think that. By the time the whole thing's over, really starting with episode five, I think you're going to start to see why it's not really a *Band of Brothers* sequel. I think it's very much got its own identity. So that's what we thought, music-wise. And if I'm being totally honest, I don't know how I could write like Michael Kamen. I don't think I'm capable of it. I came up through a very different channel of this industry. Michael nurtured Blake's talents, and John Powell nurtured mine. And in some way or another Hans has worked with both of us as well, and that's where we come together.

**BN:** Also, visually they weren't trying to make a *Band of Brothers* sequel, the producers and directors. It's nice, because *Band of Brothers* is a fantastic work of art all the way around. I think it's great when there's those comparisons. I think that it's probably like Geoff said, it's the same war, by the same producers, and it's on HBO. I think that as you watch the rest of it you understand how it is different. Beyond that, it's about a different side of the world at war; but it is just a different approach to the miniseries format.

**GZ:** If I were to try and put a point on it, I think that *The Pacific* is maybe more about the specific cost to the individual who goes through a war. Beyond that it's a little darker, because the actual fighting was simply darker in the Pacific. The other thing is, if you think about the culminating event—you know, we won the war in Germany with our soldiers; we won the war against Japan with two bombs. So the men who actually fought on those islands, they get to the end and go, 'Well if you had that bomb, what the hell did we have to go through that for?' That's a totally different ending to that half of America's World War II.

—FSMO

Comments regarding this article can be sent to: [tgreiving@gmail.com](mailto:tgreiving@gmail.com).

*Check back next issue for Part 2, as Blake Neely and Geoff Zanelli discuss whittling down the score for the album, their favorite cues, and the art of multi-composer collaborations.*