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A CONVERSATION WITH

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Composer Spotlight

Richard Wolf

By David John Farinella

Richard Wolf has some unconventional assistance while he composes music for the new WB Network animated television program *Static Shock*. "When I get the episodes to spot them, I bring them home and I spot them with the kids. They come up with questions that I don't have the answers to," Wolf admits with a laugh.

Most recently, the Wolf children were pressed into action while their dad was working on *Scooby Doo and the Cyber Chase*. "I have a 10-year-old son and a 7-year-old daughter, and now I try to watch the [cartoons] through their eyes," says Wolf. "It's great, because it's a bonding thing with the kids to show them the shows. I show them the storyboards, and I showed my son the script for *Scooby Doo* and got his feedback. My son gives me ideas for titles and sometimes lyric ideas."

Of course, it wasn't always cartoons and afternoons with the kids for Wolf.

The composer started his musical career with a solo release when he was just 17. Through the late '70s and early '80s, he played with the band Crimson Tide, and his first foray into the film

industry came in 1986 when he wrote the theme song for the Rodney Dangerfield film *Back To School*. "It was pretty much a rock 'n' roll song,

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Richard Wolf

—FROM PAGE 151, RICHARD WOLF

and I was just coming out of rock 'n' roll bands, so it wasn't such a stretch," he says of the tune he co-wrote with Mark Leonard.

"It's something you have to adapt to," he says, in reference to film music. "It was one of those musical montages where there's no dialog. Since it's a scene prominently at the top of the movie, the song has to be exciting and driving enough to maintain the interest, while, really, there's nothing happening other than the guy is in his car driving. There's no dialog, so the music has to carry a lot of the drama. We had to make it energetic."

Wolf went from *Back To School* to *Karate Kid II* to a handful of other major films. As his credit list grew, Wolf started producing albums for a variety of artists such as New Edition, Bell Biv DeVoe and the New Kids on the Block. His work with the New Kids helped him when it came time to work on the music for David O. Russell's *Three Kings*. Russell wanted a track that would allow the actors, including former New Kid Mark Wahlberg, to sing "God Bless the USA." "We were going back and forth with the tempo," Wolf explains. "Because I knew Mark from working with New Kids on the Block, I could tell David that this was the right tempo for Mark. The day before they shot it, I sent them the track. They were in the desert somewhere in Arizona. That was a lot of fun—it was challenging."

As his musical experiences were changing, so were his tastes in musical

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styles. "In the late '80s, I really started to sour on rock music—it was just becoming so corporate and bland," he says. "I started to really get into hip hop. I was into hip hop from Doug E. Fresh and Kurtis Blow days.

"I love a lot of different genres of music, but, to me, the most exciting genre right now, and probably for the past two decades, is hip hop. That's where the most innovation is, although electronic music now is starting to produce some

League to women's volleyball to golf," he says. "That was a learning experience, too, because there they give you graphics of



the reasons he enjoys working in television. "When you produce records, you are serving the vision of the artist," he says. "You're really there to bring out the best performances from the artist and to help the artist realize their vision. When you're composing or working in TV or film, the composer is the artist. You're working in the framework of the picture and the story, but it's a very broad framework. The palette of sounds and the genre that are available are more wide-

music now is starting to produce some real interesting stuff, and I'm really digging on that a lot."

In addition to film soundtracks and albums, Wolf's music has appeared on the small screen as well. He composed the themes for the shows *Sirens* and *Rock and Roll Evening News*, which, he admits laughingly, most people have probably forgotten about. Meanwhile, his songs were being used on a number of shows ranging from *The X-Files* to *Felicity* to *General Hospital*. Fox Sports also picked up some of his songs, and the channel eventually asked him to come up with some themes. "I ended up writing a bunch of themes for them, which are used in dozens of sports ranging from Major League Baseball to the National Hockey



what the openings are, and within that framework you have a lot of freedom."

Having that freedom, in fact, is one of

res that are available are very wide, at least in what I found."

The 10 Fox Sports themes that Wolf has composed have been played roughly 8,000 times, yet his "Standard Millennium" theme has received the lion's share of the plays. "It's got rock, and I would say it's triumphant and exciting," he explains. "It's supposed to get your adrenaline pumping. It's got some nice electric guitar work in it and it's very driving. I have a theory about why they love horns in sports so much—the sound of horns going back to Bach have that triumphant, victorious ring to them. I think it's a sound that's embedded in our collective unconscious."

Although Wolf is an accomplished keyboard player, he brought in session players for the Fox Sports spots. For the horns,

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Wolf turned to Tower of Power trumpet player Greg Adams, and for the guitars, he used Reggie Bennett and Romeo.

During the initial creative process, Wolf works alone, watching the video at home with his kids and then again by himself. "I don't watch it in the studio," he says. "I try to get in as early as possible to get the unconscious working. Then we digitize it, and I watch it from the computer and start working on it. I want to get all my ideas down when I'm fresh with it. Then I may do some rough edits and have my guy fix the rough points of the edits."

Wolf works at his private Studio City

facility, which is based on four Emagic Logic Audio Works cards. "I've been using it for so long I don't really know any other technology," he says, "and I've found that I don't need any other technology." He runs Logic from a Macintosh G4 and has a G3 for Propellerhead Software's Reason and ReCycle programs. As for samplers and keyboards, Wolf uses Logic's EXS24 24-bit sampler, two Korg Triton rack-mounts, Proteus 2000, Korg M-1 and a Roland JV-80 as a controller. He also gets sounds from the ILIO library for ethnic sounds. For percussion, Wolf uses a Korg Drum Machine, an E-mu SP1200 and

Reason. Wolf's outboard gear list includes an Avalon 737SP, Neve 4-band Class-A preamps, API graphic and parametric EQs, UREI LA-4, Aphex tube compressors, dbx 166X, Eventide Harmonizer 3000, and Lexicon PCM 70, PCM 60 and SPX 90. Wolf calls on the Finalizer for mixing and mastering, then delivers tracks after converting to the 48k Sound Designer II format in Logic.

Each piece of gear, from vintage to the state-of-the-art, enables Wolf to expand his sound. "They add to my sonics," he says, "to the range of what is available to me. Certainly, the Triton has its own characteristics that are different and that will inspire you to write different if you're pulling up samples from Reason. It's great to mix and match and draw on different textures for different characters and different story lines. It's part of the fun, getting to use all of this stuff and explore all of these sonic frontiers. It's inspiring to even go back to the SP1200, because sometimes I want to get that old hip hop grittiness."

Wolf had a chance to bring that sonic palette to bear on *Scooby Doo and the Cyber Chase*. As it turns out, the filmmakers wanted to move Scooby Doo into the new century, which pleased Wolf. "They wanted to have 21st century, kid-friendly pop music with a techno edge, because it takes place within a computer," he says. "That was great fun. They animated the Scooby Doo movie to the songs that I wrote."

The "Static Shock" sessions are similar with Wolf getting to blend all of his past experiences. For the big action scenes, he explains, "you need to get that driving, real adrenaline-pumping beat. Hip hop tends to stop at about 110 beats per

minute, and for those action scenes, you want to be up to 125 plus. I do use some hip hop-type vocals, some DMX-type vocals over the more electronica beat for those scenes." Other scenes call for R&B and classic hip hop, and still others for scoring beds or stings. "The different characters have different themes to them, but I think what we're doing that's kind of unique is treating them like little feature films," he adds. "If you go see *The Lion King*, you expect to hear songs and you expect to hear the vocals loud when there are action scenes, but on TV you never do. What we're doing for a lot of the big action sequences is using full-blown songs with vocals, and sometimes it could be just like electronic dance records. It's very music intensive—for 20 minutes of animation, [there are] 25 different pieces of music. It's pretty wall-to-wall. The time pressures are pretty dramatic."

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The pressure, though, is something he's learning to conquer. "I wasn't really used to that, because on the movie projects or when I'm producing records, I've had time pressures, but it's not like a weekly regimen. That I'm not used to, but I'm adjusting," he says. "Everything's got to have its upside and downside. There's certainly a lot of upside, self-expression wise and otherwise." ■
