

## Child's Play - No laughing matter?

Tom Holland was the director of the movie *Child's Play*. Don Mancini conceived the idea of a kid's doll turning into a terrifying little monster. David Kirschner designed the doll and produced the film. CHUCKY, known as Charles Lee Ray, was named after three of the most infamous killers: Charles Manson, Lee Harvey Oswald, and James Earl Ray.

After the shooting wrapped, a rough cut was assembled with some temp music put in. At that point, no composer had been hired to score the film, so music was cut into the film from other movies as a placeholder, a way to give some musical feelings to the film, a process known as temp music. The producers and the studio executives had a test viewing of the film in the outskirts of LA, a common practice in filmmaking. There are companies that specialize in setting up these test screenings. Not only do they find the theaters, but they also find an appropriate audience for a specific type of film. This is a way filmmakers can get a sense of how an audience might or may not react to their movie.

The film wasn't poorly received, but it wasn't received quite the way the filmmakers hoped. All the creators involved were alarmed because the audience laughed out loud when they saw Chucky, the animated doll, running around attacking fully grown people.

Cue panic mode: So the filmmakers went back to the cutting room and decided to add a real score rather than the temp score that they used in the test showing. They booked a composer, not me, but for whatever reason, he had to cancel out. Dave Chackler, who was the music supervisor on the film, recommended that I compose the score for *Child's Play*.

I met with Tom Holland to "spot" the film. A "spotting" session is where the composer and the director, sometimes a producer or two, get together and decide where there should be music or not. Also considered is the type of film score: big orchestra, small orchestra, all synthesized, sound design, minimal music, wall-to-wall music. Also discussed is the possibility of inserting popular records—music that's playing on a radio or TV; all these possibilities are taken into consideration.

Usually, the first thing I tell a director is to treat me like an actor. Let's talk about drama, the story, what you would like the music to do to a scene as

far as pacing, and the blocking out of the music, again just like you would talk to an actor. I listen to them, and I turn their imaginings into music. Tom Holland is a great director and writer, having also written and directed *Fright Night*. He is known in the industry as an “actor’s director.” Having been an actor, he knows exactly how to communicate with them, and as a director, he is exceptionally clever at knowing where to put the camera, framing shots, and blocking out a scene. I was quite flattered when Tom asked me for my opinion on a shot or two from some of the scenes in the film. He actually asked my opinion, which I consider the sign of a good artist and a good collaborator.

Together, the producers, Tom, and I agreed on one principle: scare the shit out of the audience.

The plan for the music production was that I would compose and perform what is known as a “mock-up”—a virtual version of an orchestra playing the music as composed. This “mock-up” also contained sound design elements that only a synthesizer could create. The idea was that the final musical track would be a combination of synthesized, a.k.a. sound design elements, and an acoustical real orchestra.

This “mock-up” score was done in a fantastic studio located up in the Hollywood Hills, recorded in the summer of '87. The studio’s creator and owner, Craig Harris, was also a brilliant audio expert, engineer, and programmer of the synthesizer. We used what was then one of the newest avant-garde synthesizers: the Synclavier. Tom and the producers approved of the mock-ups that I created, and the Synclavier then generated and printed out a master score that was handed over to a master orchestrator, and a great composer himself, Arlon Ober, who wonderfully embellished it for full orchestra.

We had hired an orchestra consisting of about 50 LA studio musicians (the best in the world), and their performance was recorded live. The recording of the orchestra was mixed back into my “mock-up” tracks. With the Synclavier, I was able to create sounds that couldn’t be created by a real orchestra.

So the musical soundtrack to the first Chucky movie was a combination of a real orchestra and synthesized sounds and added effects like repeating echoes, etc.

I seem to remember at this time, the voice of the doll Chucky hadn't really been locked down. So I recommended the same person doing the synthesizer programming, Craig Harris, to see what he could come up with because he was on the cutting edge of digitizing audio. We went into a studio, and he brought what was a vocoder type of effects generator. It took the human voice and really twisted it and messed it up so it sounded crazy weird. But the director and producers really weren't happy with it. So they came up with the idea of trying out Brad Dourif as the voice of Chucky.

Brad Dourif is an amazing actor; in fact, he plays Charles Lee Ray in the opening scene of *Child's Play*, where he is shot, picks up the Chucky doll, and transfers his body into the doll. Tom Holland came up with the idea of having Brad Dourif and give a voice to Chucky the doll and he nailed it. Brad Dourif is the voice of Chucky.

As an experiment, my friend Simon Stokes and I wrote a song for the end credits of the *Child's Play* movie. It was a very funny spoof on Chucky. We called it "The Chucky Song." "C.H.U.C.K. why don't you come out and play?" It's on YouTube. But the producers decided that it was too funny for the end of the movie. Remember, they were very sensitive to people laughing. So the song never appeared in the film but was released as a record and got some play from Dr. Demento in Los Angeles.

For the music needed as the end credits roll, I created an instrumental little ditty that people often think of as the main theme for *Child's Play*. It's not really, but I'll take the win. As for the construction of the music, I used the form of "Pachelbel's Canon in D." This form is known as a fugue or a canon.

I sampled my voice using the Synclavier, the "la, la, la singing." Those "Las" you hear are my sampled voice. So I called the piece "When the Composer Sings?" It received absolutely no recognition at all. At least the film was a hit. As Don Mancini, the creator of Chucky, said, "It was like Pachelbel's Canon, but minor and weird; I loved it."

Having excellent taste, Tom, the producers, and the studio were happy with the music. In fact, later, one of the producers, who shall not be named, related to me that one of the film company's executives had told him something like, "Your composer has just turned a B film into a hit movie." That's what I was told.

If you're a fan of the Seinfeld show like I am, pay attention to the background when Jerry is standing in front of his shelf of videotapes and movies; you will notice that *Child's Play* is always in his collection somewhere.

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