

11TH STREET STUDIOS	388
AIR-EDEL	66
AIRGIGS	422
ALVANI TUNES	174
ALVANI TUNES	297
BILLYSULLIVANSORE.COM	34
BILLYSULLIVANSORE.COM	430
BMI	325
CHAMPION SITE + SOUND	424
CHARLESTON SOUND STUDIOS	388
CLEOPATRA RECORDS	328
CROSSOVER ENTERTAINMENT	390
DAYTRIPPER	298
DOWNTOWN MUSIC PUBLISHING	228
EMG LICENSING	299
EMG LICENSING	415
ERIC COLVIN	72
EXTASEE	425
FORMOSA MUSIC	162
FRESH FLAVOR	302
GHOSTWRITER MUSIC GROUP	2
GHOSTWRITER MUSIC GROUP	16
GUILFORD SOUND	439
GUILFORD SOUND	440
HIPGNOSIS SONGS FUND	232
HIPGNOSIS SONGS FUND	481
HOLLYWOOD VAULTS	128
HUMM CONSULTANCY	442
HYFI	423
ICEBERG MUSIC GROUP	212
ICEBERG MUSIC GROUP	308
IN MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT	216
JC3 MEDIA MUSIC	233
JOE KURASZ	88
JUST FOR THE RECORD	391
KEY ORIGINAL LIVESTREAMS	428
KSA MANAGEMENT	323
LAHOMES4U	441
LOST IN SOUND	331
MICHAEL WELSH PRODUCTIONS	17
MUSIC SUPERVISOR.COM	144
NEW HEIGHTS ENTERTAINMENT	3
NEW WORLD RECORDS	329
NEW WORLD RECORDS	411
PEER MUSIC	231
PEN MUSIC	296
PLAYGROUND MUSIC PUBLISHING	264
PLAYGROUND MUSIC SYNC MASTERS	330
PLUM CREATIVE CONSULTING	437
REPRTOIR.COM	4
REPRTOIR.COM	283
SIDEDOORACCESS.COM	435
SKYWALKER SOUND	406
SOUNDS OF INDIA	24
STREAM TUNE-UP	431
STUDIO REFERRAL SERVICE	389
SYNCHTANK	152
SYNGSUMMIT.COM	111
THE CITY OF PRAGUE ORCHESTRA	320
THE CUTTING ROOM	387
THE DIMENNA CENTER	408
TRACKDOWN	433
TREVANNA TRACKS	151
TRUE ROAD MUSIC	175
ULTIMATE STUDIOS, INC.	426
WARNER CHAPPELL PROD. MUSIC	173
ZERO FEE MUSIC	209

This Game's Called Murder – Bear McCreary

Original Review by Jonathan Broxton

A comedy-horror-thriller with an indie attitude, “This Game’s Called Murder” is the latest film from writer-director Adam Sherman. It stars Ron Perlman, Natasha Henstridge, and Vanessa Marano, and is about the eccentric members of the Wallendorf family. Mr. Wallendorf is a fashion mogul and designer of iconic red high heeled shoes, and Mrs. Wallendorf is his conniving brutal wife. Their daughter, Jennifer, is a superstar on social media, and it is her struggle to come to terms with who she is inside this powerful but massively dysfunctional family that leads her down a road of violence, anarchy, and many, many Instagram posts. The film premiered in a few theaters and on streaming services in December 2021, but mostly it has flown under the radar – and it would have flown under mine entirely were it not for the fact that it was scored by Bear McCreary.

I think it would be fair to say that, had he not been called to become a film composer, then Bear McCreary would likely have been a rock star. His brother, Brendan, *is* a bona-fide rocker, having been the front man of the band Young Beautiful & In A Hurry for many years, and now fronting a new rock band called Crisis Couture, but throughout his career Bear has brought a rock music vibe and a grungy edge to many of his scores – I’m thinking especially of things like Knights of Badassdom from 2013, the pirate rock of the TV series Black Sails, and especially the animated show Masters of the Universe: Revelation from earlier this year. However, I think



COMPOSER BEAR MCCREARY



TVANESSA MARANO IN ‘THIS GAME’S CALLED MURDER’

that “This Game’s Called Murder” might very well be the apex of all that. It’s an enormous score that blends loud screaming rock music with some wild and anarchic vocal surprises that range from Latin chanting to Icelandic grunting, all in the service of this peculiar and psychedelic film.

But, before we get to all that, we start with a song. McCreary has been a fan of the legendary Los Angeles art rock group Oingo Boingo for many years, and the song “This Game’s Called Murder” is his tribute to them. Basically, it’s the greatest Boingo song that Danny Elfman never wrote. The music and lyrics are by Bear, and the lead vocal is by Brendan, who heads a supergroup comprising Boingo legends Steve Bartek and John Avila on lead guitar and bass, as well as former Marilyn Manson drummer Gil Sharone. Bear plays keyboards and sings backing vocals, while all the ‘weird percussion’ is by LA-based composer and producer Ego Plum. Brendan does his darndest to channel Elfman’s slightly psychotic vocal stylings à la “Little Girls,” and succeeds admirably. The falsetto backing vocals are pure 1980s, the la-la-la tones are quintessential Elfman, and the whole thing just revels in nostalgia for the era. As a fellow devotee of 1980s big-haired rock I absolutely loved it – for me, it’s one of the best original songs of the year.

The score proper begins with the theme for Ron Perlman’s character, the “Mr. Wallendorf Theme”. The idea is characterized by a host of low, gruff, growling chants, which come across as being impossibly masculine, and feel like an offshoot from the pirate sea shanties McCreary wrote for the TV series Black Sails in 2014. The vocals are then augmented with a bluesy guitar, heavy percussion, and a honkytonk piano, in what turns



CONTENTS 5

This Game’s Called Murder – Bear McCreary 14

Some of last year’s best film music 9

“We see ourselves as being a part of the biggest sync team in the world” 300



ADVERTISING AGENCIES 16 **NEWS**

CLEARANCE COMPANIES 24

COMMERCIAL MUSIC PRODUCTION 34

COMPOSER AGENTS 66

COMPOSERS 72

CONFERENCES & EVENTS 106 **NEWS**

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES 111

MARKETPLACE 128

MUSIC CONTRACTORS 140

MUSIC DEPARTMENTS 144 **NEWS**

MUSIC EDITORS 162

MUSIC LIBRARIES 173

MUSIC PLACEMENT COMPANIES 209

MUSIC PREPARATION 228

MUSIC PUBLISHERS 231

MUSIC SERVICES 283

MUSIC SUPERVISORS 296 **NEWS**

ORCHESTRAS 320

PAYROLL SERVICES 323

PERFORMING RIGHTS SOCIETIES 325

RECORD LABELS 328

RECORDING STUDIOS 387

SCORE MIXERS 406

SCORING STAGES 408

TRAILER HOUSES 411

VIDEO GAME COMPANIES 415 **NEWS**

VIRTUAL RESOURCES 422

COMPANY & LAST NAME INDEX 443

FIRST NAME INDEX 474

Film & Television Music Guide ISSUE 67

11TH STREET STUDIOS	388
AIR-EDEL	66
AIRGIGS	422
ALVANI TUNES	174
ALVANI TUNES	297
BILLYSULLIVANSORE.COM	34
BILLYSULLIVANSORE.COM	430
BMI	325
CHAMPION SITE + SOUND	424
CHARLESTON SOUND STUDIOS	388
CLEOPATRA RECORDS	328
CROSSOVER ENTERTAINMENT	390
DAYTRIPPER	298
DOWNTOWN MUSIC PUBLISHING	228
EMG LICENSING	299
EMG LICENSING	415
ERIC COLVIN	72
EXTASEE	425
FORMOSA MUSIC	162
FRESH FLAVOR	302
GHOSTWRITER MUSIC GROUP	2
GHOSTWRITER MUSIC GROUP	16
GUILFORD SOUND	439
GUILFORD SOUND	440
HIPGNOSIS SONGS FUND	232
HIPGNOSIS SONGS FUND	481
HOLLYWOOD VAULTS	128
HUMM CONSULTANCY	442
HYFI	423
ICEBERG MUSIC GROUP	212
ICEBERG MUSIC GROUP	308
IN MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT	216
JC3 MEDIA MUSIC	233
JOE KURASZ	88
JUST FOR THE RECORD	391
KEY ORIGINAL LIVESTREAMS	428
KSA MANAGEMENT	323
LAHOMES4U	441
LOST IN SOUND	331
MICHAEL WELSH PRODUCTIONS	17
MUSIC SUPERVISOR.COM	144
NEW HEIGHTS ENTERTAINMENT	3
NEW WORLD RECORDS	329
NEW WORLD RECORDS	411
PEER MUSIC	231
PEN MUSIC	296
PLAYGROUND MUSIC PUBLISHING	264
PLAYGROUND MUSIC SYNC MASTERS	330
PLUM CREATIVE CONSULTING	437
REPRTOIR.COM	4
REPRTOIR.COM	283
SIDEDOORACCESS.COM	435
SKYWALKER SOUND	406
SOUNDS OF INDIA	24
STREAM TUNE-UP	431
STUDIO REFERRAL SERVICE	389
SYNCHTANK	152
SYNGSUMMIT.COM	111
THE CITY OF PRAGUE ORCHESTRA	320
THE CUTTING ROOM	387
THE DIMENNA CENTER	408
TRACKDOWN	433
TREVANNA TRACKS	151
TRUE ROAD MUSIC	175
ULTIMATE STUDIOS, INC.	426
WARNER CHAPPELL PROD. MUSIC	173
ZERO FEE MUSIC	209

out to be a wonderfully dirty combo – it’s the musical equivalent of a voice darkened by decades of cigars and whisky. The rest of the score is, essentially, an amalgam of several specific techniques and vocal and instrumental ideas, which combine with the Wallendorf theme in a multitude of overlapping ways, essentially creating a musical kaleidoscope where every cue contains three or four of the multiple different ideas, colliding and integrating in numerous different permutations. Almost all of the cues contain the basic building blocks of rock music – electric guitar, rhythm guitar, rock drum kit percussion – but these are then augmented with one or more of a series of fascinating and unusual devices.

Perhaps the most striking idea in the score is what I’m describing as ‘creepy Latin chanting’. It gets its first introduction, briefly, at the beginning of “The Wallendorf Game,” but really explodes into life in the second half of “Jennifer and Cane,” and then again in “The Woman in the Mirror”. I’m not well-versed enough in Latin to know what they are saying, but the vibe that comes across sounds sort of like demonic sacrifice to Beelzebub. The vocal tones McCreary uses are quivery and breathlessly over-excited, and are oddly high pitched, so that the whole thing becomes desperately creepy. For some reason the music puts me in mind of those wonderfully cheesy British Hammer Horror films from the 1950s and 60s, where some lovely virginal young girl would be sacrificed by an evil cult, to the strains of this chanting.

The second striking vocal idea comes via the contribution of the Faroese singer-songwriter Eivør Pálsdóttir. Eivør sings, wails, chants, and uses extended vocal techniques ranging from heavy breathing to what sounds like traditional Nordic kulning, and it’s all over the score. I don’t think McCreary is trying to make any specific geographic allusions to Scandinavia or the Faroe Islands here as much as he is just having fun with off-the-beaten-path sounds and ideas. The first appearance of Eivør’s voice comes in “The Great Ramen Heist,” parts of which remind me of Daniel Pemberton’s King Arthur: Legend of the Sword, and it’s quite fascinating. The underpinning rhythms are all spiky and angular, and often remind me of some of the wildly experimental early work Danny Elfman did with his brother Richard on things like Face Like a Frog, Shrunk on Heads, and even Forbidden Zone – yet more Oingo Boingo references.

“Cynthia Fight” opens with a massive explosion of vocal power from Eivør – a Viking warrior in the house – and there are also prominent performances from her in “Carousels and Dreams,” “Gold and Betrayal,” and “Combat Rules”, the latter of which sees the vocals adopting a pseudo-Morricone western vibe. Later, “Seduction and Asphyxiation” opens with a set of dreamy music box textures – dancing flutes and solo violin

– but when Eivør’s vocals come in during the second half of the cue – aggressive, insistent, driving – there is a palpable sense of danger to the whole thing.

Many of the cues feature toy instruments and light metallic touches like chimes, triangles, and glockenspiels, as part of the percussion section; this is something that McCreary experimented with on his score for the Child’s Play reboot in 2019, and it gives this score an undeniably peculiar vibe. You can hear the toy percussion prominently in “The Wallendorf Game,” “Gold and Betrayal,” and “Heartbroken Jennifer,” among others, and the way McCreary uses it brings a sort of innocence, perhaps even some sympathy and empathy, for the girl who grew up in this terrible family environment, and whose twisted personality was shaped by their influence.

Once in a while McCreary’s love of French music in general, and the sound of the accordion in particular, comes through, although again it doesn’t seem as though McCreary is trying to generate a sound specifically related to France as he is simply playing with one of his favorite instruments. The accordion is featured prominently in the final moments of “The Wallendorf Game,” parts of “The Woman in the Mirror,” and especially towards the end of “Gold and Betrayal”. The score also makes frequent use of a calliope sound, like something from a broken and demented funfair. You can hear this prominently at the beginning of “Jennifer and Cane,” where it combines with the toy percussion, harp glissandi, and a solo violin, and has a sense that it’s sort of all disintegrating and collapsing in on itself. It then goes on to feature prominently in “Carousels and Dreams” – the dark side of Big Top Pee Wee – as well as “Heartbroken Jennifer”. Elsewhere, “The Game Called Snafu” is a prominent reprise of the Wallendorf Theme, surrounded by precise staccato rhythms, but which ends on a lighter note of bucolic woodwinds and pizzicato strings in a call-and-response conversation with the electric guitars.

Both “Ransacking the Grocery Store” and “The Congratulations Game Pt I” make excellent use of a scampering pizzicato string idea doubled by electric guitars, which gives off unexpected vibes of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’ from The Nutcracker. And, of course, throughout it all the whole thing is awash in brilliant rock music – although even here McCreary takes some time to change the stylistics up and keep the music fresh. For example, in “Date Night,” the rock combines with some progressive electronica, and comes off a little bit off-kilter and unhinged, while other cues feel like they might almost be tributes to some of McCreary’s favorite rock guitarists – Paul Landers from Rammstein in “Cynthia Fight,” surf rock legend Dick Dale in “Jennifer Creeps” and “Combat Rules,” Ron Cooley from Mannheim Steamroller in “Ransacking the Grocery Store”

and “The Congratulations Game Pt I,” and so on. Some of these guitar licks also seem to quote the main thematic motif from the song, in a nice bit of recurring consistency.

The penultimate cue, “Finding Gold,” is more upbeat, and has an unexpectedly optimistic rock vibe, almost heroic and anthemic, but which again prominently features Eivør’s wordless vocals and the freaky calliope. The conclusive “The End of the Game” is just nuts, an unstoppable extravaganza of bonkers Danny Elfman rock, throbbing guitars and pounding drums, all accompanied by one final blast of the insane demonic chanting, snickering and chattering like a demented pixie.

I would suggest that, in order to really appreciate “This Game’s Called Murder,” you have to have a very high tolerance for eccentricity. This is probably the weirdest score Bear McCreary has ever written: from the gruff growls of the main Wallendorf theme, to the ethereal Nordic sound of Eivør, to the demented demonic chattering in Latin, to the funfair calliope from hell, nothing here is straightforward, or predictable. But what it does have is an insane amount of creativity, and a sense of experimental musical anarchy, and if you can get your head into that mindset, there is a massive amount of fun to be had.

Track Listing:

“This Game’s Called Murder” (written by Bear McCreary, performed by Brendan McCreary feat. Steve Bartek, John Avila, Gil Sharone, and Ego Plum) (3:56)

- ▶ Mr. Wallendorf Theme (3:59)
- ▶ The Wallendorf Game (2:45)
- ▶ Date Night (2:23)
- ▶ The Great Ramen Heist (4:09)
- ▶ Jennifer and Cane (4:49)
- ▶ Cynthia Fight (2:43)
- ▶ The Woman in the Mirror (6:14)
- ▶ Carousels and Dreams (1:49)
- ▶ Jennifer Creeps (3:03)
- ▶ The Game Called Snafu (2:18)
- ▶ Ransacking the Grocery Store (1:10)
- ▶ Gold and Betrayal (4:11)
- ▶ Heartbroken Jennifer (3:30)
- ▶ Combat Rules (3:29)
- ▶ Seduction and Asphyxiation (1:49)
- ▶ The Congratulations Game Pt I (3:21)
- ▶ The Congratulations Game Pt II (1:16)
- ▶ Finding Gold (4:25)
- ▶ The End of the Game (2:13)

Running Time: 63 minutes 22 seconds
Sparks & Shadows (2021)

Music composed and conducted by Bear McCreary. Orchestrations by Sean Barrett and Benjamin Hoff. Special vocal performances by Eivør Pálsdóttir. Recorded and mixed by Ryan Sanchez. Edited by XXXX. Album produced by Bear McCreary. ■

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This Game’s Called Murder
– Bear McCreary 14

Some of last year’s best
film music 9

“We see ourselves as being a part
of the biggest sync team in the
world” 300



ADVERTISING AGENCIES 16 **NEWS**

CLEARANCE COMPANIES 24

COMMERCIAL MUSIC PRODUCTION 34

COMPOSER AGENTS 66

COMPOSERS 72

CONFERENCES & EVENTS 106 **NEWS**

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES 111

MARKETPLACE 128

MUSIC CONTRACTORS 140

MUSIC DEPARTMENTS 144 **NEWS**

MUSIC EDITORS 162

MUSIC LIBRARIES 173

MUSIC PLACEMENT COMPANIES 209

MUSIC PREPARATION 228

MUSIC PUBLISHERS 231

MUSIC SERVICES 283

MUSIC SUPERVISORS 296 **NEWS**

ORCHESTRAS 320

PAYROLL SERVICES 323

PERFORMING RIGHTS SOCIETIES 325

RECORD LABELS 328

RECORDING STUDIOS 387

SCORE MIXERS 406

SCORING STAGES 408

TRAILER HOUSES 411

VIDEO GAME COMPANIES 415 **NEWS**

VIRTUAL RESOURCES 422

COMPANY & LAST NAME INDEX 443

FIRST NAME INDEX 474