

THE SOUNDS OF BREAKING BAD

DAVE PORTER SCORES THE COMPLEX WORLD OF AMC'S HIT SERIES

by Sarah Stanfield

IN *BREAKING BAD*, THE AMC TELEVISION SERIES CHRONICLING THE DESCENT OF MIDDLE-AGED CHEMISTRY TEACHER WALTER WHITE (PLAYED BY BRYAN CRANSTON) INTO THE NEFARIOUS WORLD OF METHAMPHETAMINE PRODUCTION, THE COLORS OF CHARACTERS AND SHOTS APPEAR A BIT MURKY, EVEN IN DAYLIGHT. THIS IS PROBABLY DELIBERATE, AS FEW CHARACTERS ON THE SHOW, CREATED BY FORMER *X-FILES* PRODUCER AND WRITER VINCE GILLIGAN, ARE PURELY GOOD OR BAD. AS IN REAL LIFE, THEY ARE PEOPLE REACTING TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES THROWN AT THEM, MAKING CERTAIN CHOICES AS A RESULT. FOR DAVE PORTER, THE SHOW'S COMPOSER, IT'S THIS GRAY AREA THAT INFORMS HIM AS HE CREATES THE SERIES' EERIE AND SUBTLY MENACING SCORE.



Photo by Ben Leuner/AMC

“When I first saw the pilot episode [of *Breaking Bad*], what struck me about the show was that it was complex and also completely unexpected,” says Porter. This is certainly the case with White, who starts the series as a married father with a Ph.D. in chemistry and a teaching job at a high school in Albuquerque, NM. Diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, he begins concocting a highly pure form of meth to help his family cope with the bills if he dies. It’s a major departure for those who remember Cranston as the frazzled, goofball dad on *Malcolm in the Middle*. And many of the characters, such as the deadly drug distributor Gus Fring, who maintains a public persona of a friendly, law-abiding businessman, are not who they appear to be in *Breaking Bad*. “I thought the score had to reflect that,” says Porter.

To do this, as well as create the general sense of unease in a world where few people are who they say they are, Porter records mostly ethnic instruments, such as claves, two wooden dowels that are struck together; the quena, an Andean flute; and a koto, a Japanese instrument similar to a zither or harp. He also makes use of “found sounds” that are often related to *Breaking Bad*’s main themes, such as clocks, hospital respirators, elevator beeps, guns cocking, chemistry beakers clinking, and ATM machines being hit by sledgehammers. Very often, Porter melds together and distorts these sounds, using his large collection of vintage and modern synthesizers and outboard effects, along with Pro Tools plug-ins, to further the skewed ambience of the series.

The show opener exemplifies Porter’s unique instrumentation. It begins with the twang of a guitar, followed by what sounds like a wooden instrument tapping on a hollow base, then finishes with what seems to be a rattlesnake shaking its tail. It gives the impression of the

desert at night, with unseen creatures lurking just underfoot. The guitar sound comes from a resonator guitar, which has an entirely metal body, while the tapping is actually the counter melody to the show’s theme, which Porter created using samples of a variety of metal cans and car parts, recording them as he struck them with mallets. He then loaded them into a Kontakt software sampler and pitched the tones into a melodic pattern. The rattlesnake sound comes from claves.

As for the individual episodes, Porter often employs a subtler score, music that arises out of a scene’s ambient sounds. “One of my goals is to create complexity and depth without being overbearing,” he says, emphasizing that he doesn’t want the music to take away from the acting. In “Box Cutter,” which opens season four, for example, the episode begins with shots of the ill-fated character Gale Boetticher

“One of my goals is to create complexity and depth without being overbearing.”

—Dave Porter

(played by David Costabile) slicing through containers of equipment for Fring’s meth superlab with a box cutter. To create the score around the episode, Porter sampled the sound of various box cutters, which he then processed, stretched, and distorted, using these tidbits as rhythmic elements in the score.

Porter also uses certain sounds to compliment the actions of *Breaking Bad* characters. In one infamous scene from “Box Cutter,” Fring enters his superlab, where White and his partner, Jesse Pinkman, played by Aaron Paul, have been tied up by Fring’s henchmen. The score, which sounds like the muted scream of a teakettle, or a cawing bird, plays low in the background as Fring makes his way toward the duo. The tension of the scene is heightened by the score, which



Dave with Vince Gilligan (in glasses), show creator of *Breaking Bad*. Photo courtesy of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences/PictureGroup.



sion shows do this, but we always make time for it.”

After the spotting session, Porter works on the episode at his home studio. Loading it as a QuickTime file onto his Avid Pro Tools HD13 DAW, he starts the job. “I actually compose and record in Pro Tools,” he says. “It’s my main platform.” Porter’s process, when he starts a particular cue, is to watch the scene repeatedly with a metronome, at a lot of different tempos. “I do this until I find one that is the best with the edits and the picture, and with the general sort of tone of the scene.”

As for the actual composing, like most artistic endeavors, it’s a process of trial and error. Porter improvises different ideas against the picture until he finds the one that captures the emotion he’s looking for and is capable of being a foundation for a cue. As Porter puts it, “It could be a snippet of melody, an evolving pattern, or something purely rhythmic.”

Porter usually has four to five days to create the music for each episode. He delivers it as a rough QuickTime file via his website to Gilligan, who reviews it and gives his notes on it, then sends it back to Porter. Porter usually gets about a day to polish this file, then turns it over for the final mix of the score, along with the stems, to the *Breaking Bad* music editor. This takes place the day before the final mix, which happens at the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank.

Generally, Porter will be working on two episodes simultaneously. He’ll start composing for one episode, get it back to Gilligan, and then will receive the second episode. “I’ve gotten the next episode already, but with the previous episode, I’m now preparing for the final mix at Warner Bros.,” he says. “That happens during week two when I’m writing the second episode.”

doesn’t give the audience any clue to Fring’s motives.

Sometimes Porter chooses to forgo score all together, especially in particularly momentous scenes. In the aforementioned scene, for example, the sound stops as Fring closes in on White and Pinkman, then commits an atrocious act. “What’s scariest and most intense about the moment is the build-up,” says Porter. “[Fring] walks around with incredible purpose and intention, but you have no idea what that’s going to be. I think it’s important not to tip the audience or suggest the audience feel a certain way.”

THE PROCESS

Deciding whether or not to use score, as well as all other music-related issues for a particular episode, is a group effort between Porter, Gilligan, *Breaking Bad*’s music supervisor, music editor, and usually the scriptwriter of the episode. The group gets together for a spotting session at the *Breaking Bad* offices in Burbank, CA, where everyone watches the episode, which is completed with the excep-

tion of the music and sound. “We watch it and re-watch it, very slowly, and talk about every scene, whether it should be the score or licensed source music; whether there should be any music at all, and what the music is trying to accomplish,” says Porter. “I believe this is a critical step in the process. Not all televi-





**Creating the mood for
Breaking Bad. Photo by
Julio Moreno.**

BACK AT THE LAB

Most of Porter's work, however, happens at his studio, which he built out of his two-car garage in the backyard of his home in Studio City, CA, with the help of GC Pro representative Rich Avrach, who works out of GC Pro's Hollywood store. "They were enormously helpful in supplying all kinds of things that I needed to get this going," says Porter. GC Pro supplied him with updated Pro Tools software and hardware, Switchcraft analog patchbays for his vintage synthesizers, and Primacoustic sonic treatment, which Porter installed in the studio himself. GC Pro also offers its support of Porter in other ways — Mike Pendleton, the general counsel for Guitar Center, which owns GC Pro, is Porter's first-call guitar player on *Breaking Bad*.

Dave also uses a pair of Genelec 1031A monitors, Sound Toys plug-ins,

and what he refers to as "a huge collection of compressors, distortion devices, and all kinds of things that mangle sound" to compose for *Breaking Bad*. Some of these outboard effects processors include a modified Lexicon PCM-42, a gated Korg spring reverb GR-1, a TC Electronic Fireworx, and Kurzweil KSP-8.

Porter's approximately 25 "hard" vintage synthesizers, along with a dozen software synthesizers, are perhaps the most notable element of his studio. Among some of these systems are an ARP 2600, a Roland Jupiter 8, an Oberheim Matrix 12, and the Octave-Plateau Voyetra 8. "One of the beauties of those older analog synthesizers is that they can be unpredictable by their nature, which is what drove people crazy about them in the old days," says Porter. "But with *Breaking Bad*, I'm trying to emphasize that unsettled,

unpredictable feeling. And having synthesizers that are fading and slightly out of tune here and there adds that realism and sense of a little unease."

With *Breaking Bad* currently on hiatus, Porter has turned his attention to other projects. Right now, he's composing the music for *Burn*, a documentary about urban decay in Detroit as seen through the eyes of its firefighters. No doubt he is using the electronic music wizardry that he first honed as an undergraduate in music composition at Sarah Lawrence College, where he studied under electronic music pioneer John Yannelli and avant-garde classical composer Meyer Kupferman.

After college, Porter assisted composers Philip Glass and Howard Shore in New York City, a career trajectory that he recommends aspiring composers follow. "These are hard opportunities to come by, especially today, but [getting into composing for episodic television or similar careers] is about surrounding yourself with talented people and knowing you are subservient to the larger goal, which is to create a great piece of television or film." If *Breaking Bad* is any indicator, Porter has already achieved this, in spades. ■