[**Interview with *District 9* Composer Clinton Shorter**](http://www.tor.com/2009/09/17/interview-with-district-9-composer-clinton-shorter/)

[mike sargent](http://www.tor.com/author/mike-sargent/)

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To me, *District 9* was one of the best and most original science fiction films to come along in a very long time. In a field crowded with noisy blockbusters and painfully bad remakes of classic SF films, *District 9* was a welcome breath of fresh air. Its frenetic pacing and documentary sensibility underscore the urgency of a scenario that is all too believable.

District 9 poses many provocative questions. What if aliens did land here and had no way to get home? And if they were not able to scare or dominate us with their power, how would we respond? What aspects of humanity would be gained or lost in those who deal with them? What if a country and culture had a history rife with social and civil injustices? Would those who were former victims become like their oppressors? Would the former oppressors continue to oppress the new “others?”

These are all incredibly interesting themes, and like the best of what I deem to be true SF, they are integral to the story itself. The genre allows us to examine and comment on the human condition and to ponder our place in the universe.

The music for *District 9* is equally provocative and interesting. I had the opportunity to interview the composer, Clinton Shorter, a few days before the film’s release and ask him how he tackled this project.

**Mike Sargent:** Clinton, tell me a little bit about the genesis, or as you say the mutation, of the score, and why did you pick some of the elements you used?

**Clinton Shorter:** Yeah, the mutation …here were just so many moments to really try and key in on. Wikus’s transformation, and we really wanted to key in with the fact that, you know, there was a lot of technology in the film.

**MS:** Well, one of the things I noticed is that when something that’s really human happened, like the phone call that he gets from his wife, you stuck more with acoustic and traditional instruments as opposed to electronic ones, or even the human voice. And then when we saw things having to do with the aliens, you would actually use that human voice. Tell me a little bit about that. Am I wrong about the choices you made?

**CS:** No, you’re pretty close, actually! The interesting thing was, with the call with the wife-that is a kamancheh player, he’s an Iranian with an Iranian instrument. I had this Iranian player come in, and what I did was, because of all this experimentation with different types of instruments and a lot of the problems that Neill (Blomkamp, the director) was having with it not sounding deep and dark enough, I did a lot of sampling. What I did was: I took the kamancheh player, put it into my computer and really fiddled around with it, and actually brought it down a couple of octaves and created a pad out of it-so it actually is an acoustic instrument, but it comes across as a little bit synthetic.

The interesting thing was that I did score those emotional sequences originally with orchestra, and Neill felt it sounded too much like traditional movie music-he said it sounded too much like E.T., which was quite funny; nobody’d directly told me that before. So anyways, I decided to start experimenting with stuff like that, and Neill just immediately locked right in and loved that kind of sound. So, yeah, with all of the more heroic moments of the film we went [with] more full orchestra. One of the tricky things was, the film starts off as a documentary, and it took us a while to get the sound together, because I’m used to scoring sequences, and what he really wanted was more of a blanket type of score for the opening, the first act. He couldn’t really articulate it, he just wasn’t too sure, and I kept scoring and scoring and scoring  I was framing in too much, and he really wanted it to be more a documentary style where they just ride the fader up and down, then as the film gets more dramatic and cinematic, they introduce more traditional scoring styles.

**MS:** Well, that makes sense. So it’s almost like a blanket that’s an element to the overall texture of the film, and then becomes more scored?

**CS:** That’s right. Yeah, absolutely. And some of the other challenges, too, were trying to maintain as much of an African feel as possible-you’ve talked about the African vocals-we tried everything we could. But because it’s in the Southern part of the continent, most of the music is quite positive, and the rhythms weren’t aggressive enough, so in the end the main elements that were African were the vocals, and then some of the percussion, but most of the percussion was just too small for Neill. So we did take a lot of liberties, in terms of the score, but I think it works, and I’m glad you think it works

**MS:** Well, I think it works very well, and seeing it the second time, I’m less caught up with the story and now looking at details. As a matter of fact, I have a colleague who’s a big score-head as well, and right after the film was over, he leaned over to me last night and said, “Did you get the score yet?!!” So I just want you to know, you’ve already got fans building.

**CS:** Awesome, that’s great! I had a buddy of mine go and see it, and he said it was too quiet! So I’m glad that people are picking up on it. I actually haven’t heard it with the final mix yet-I wasn’t able to go to New Zealand; we’ve got a premiere tonight. But I think I’m gonna go today by myself and see it and just have a listen, so I can really get a feel for it and not be sitting on the edge of my seat the whole time, so I can just relax.

**MS:** Well, you know what’s funny, and I consider this a compliment to you. The first time I saw it, I was not so aware of the score, because it seemed more atmospheric-I couldn’t have been able to tell you, “What’s the theme?”, “What was the music?”, or what kind of cues were used. The second time, knowing I was going to interview you today, I paid a little more attention to it and I’m really enjoying what you did. I think it is a very integral part of the film and it’s integrated so well that there are only moments, like when sound goes out that you notice. If you haven’t seen it, there are points which are very emotional in the film, or very exciting, or very tense, where the music is almost a counterpoint to what’s going on and gives it depth. I felt, in many ways, the movie’s about “what does it takes to be human?”, and that human voice element, it really kind of gets to the heart of the story. Do you know what I’m saying?

**CS:** Great, man! I really appreciate that-really there are a lot of complicated emotions here because we’re dealing with a hero that’s begrudgingly becoming a hero. There aren’t those key moments where he’s doing it because he’s trying to do the right thing-he’s just so pissed off at everybody that he just snaps. So, the moments where he’s being heroic, you still kind of feel that he’s into it for himself, until the very end. So it was tricky, for sure; there wasn’t any straight-up moment where it was obvious how to treat it, for the viewer, or how to help the viewer feel. But yeah, all the reviews seem to be coming in quite well for the movie as a whole, so I guess we got it down pretty good.

**MS:** Personally, I think it’s going to be, like, the sleeper hit of the summer. I think everybody involved will be, as they say, household names very soon. I think your phone will be ringing off the hook. Now, let me ask you a few more things. In terms of the language, which sounds to me like part of the difficulty translating or communicating to an audience the feeling you want them to have, what was your approach to writing it? Let’s say this is the scene where the military guy comes into the ship, and we see the little creature hiding, and you’ve got this music where you’re worried about the creature, you’ve already fallen in love with this little creature, and you’re afraid for him, but the music’s telling you, “It’s okay, he’ll be okay.” What elements do you use in your background, to communicate some of the emotions you want to communicate, while keeping in the texture of the film? It doesn’t seem like it was an easy order

**CS:** Yeah, it’s tough-there were some tricky moments emotionally, for sure. Those kind of situations, you know, you just have to maintain some hope; I’m trying to maintain some hope, because it looks like it’s all lost. People aren’t going to be expecting the ambush afterwards, which is a great surprise for them to have. You just need to keep them emotionally engaged, especially because you know that Wikus has just completely betrayed them. What he did was only looking out for himself, he put Little C.J. in danger, so you’ve got to be very careful not to have the viewer be mad at Wikus, think that all hope is lost, so there are those moments when you do have to score counter to what you’re really seeing in order to keep the viewer engaged. Thanks for picking up on it!

**MS:** Now, tell me a little about you. When did you know you wanted to be a musician, and when did you know you wanted to be, more specifically, a composer for film, television, and commercials?

**CS:** Well, the interesting thing is that when I got into ninth grade, I looked at my electives that I had to choose from, and I DID NOT want to take drama. I did not want to take acting, whatsoever, so I tried to find any other thing but that, and I just picked guitar. I said, “Oh, I’ll try guitar, who knows?” I had no idea, no idea, how much in love I’d fallen. I couldn’t get enough of it, I ended up going to a different high school which actually had a recording studio, and then I became a real studio nut. I went from being an honor roll, Mathlete student to uh(laughs) real good grades in music because I was in there 24/7. So I was always writing, but I was never interested in writing in standard (tonal/song) format. I had an experimental rock trio, we were always jamming, and one of the things we’d do was go on weekends to my family’s cabin. And I had a friend of mine come up, and he brought the score to Mark Isham’s “Never Cry Wolf.”

**MS:** Oh! Great score!

**CS:** And I’d always heard the big, bombastic orchestral scores; I just couldn’t relate. It just wasn’t like any of the music I listened to, but I heard this, and it was much more of a synth-based score, and my jaw dropped. I’d never heard anything like this before. At the time, I thought, “He’s writing whatever he wanted to,” which is what I wanted to do-I was too naïve to realize that the film was dictating what he was writing. But I was just completely drawn in, and from that point on out I was trying to get as many film scores as I could, I went to a different school and took a digital music program and learned more about synthesis and MIDI and really honed my studio skills, and I got a gig assisting a film and television composer for about five years and then branched out on my own.

**MS:** Wow. It’s funny that you should say that, I remember that score-I think there were three scores on that CD. “Never Cry Wolf” and two others

**CS:** “Mrs. Soffel” I can’t remember the third one. But yeah, the album’s called “[Film Music](http://www.google.com/musicl?lid=H-6M_yLSqqM&aid=A0ZsrUp34RE&ei=_l6cSrDWBc6L8QbG04GwBQ&sa=X&oi=music&ct=result),” it was on Windham Hill (Records), I think.

**MS:** Well, I loved those scores, and I loved the atmosphere, how as soon as it starts, you’re transported, as your music does-you’re taken somewhere else. So, tell me a bit about using acoustic versus electronic, and finding that right balance so that one doesn’t overpower the other, so that you don’t necessarily realize, “oh this is that, and that’s this”  like what you told me you did with the kamancheh. It worked. I would have thought it was orchestral; the atmosphere was clear, but I couldn’t necessarily tell you what instrument it was

**CS:** That’s the stuff that rings true to me. I know there’s a great debate going on about fellow film scorers that are feeling like they’re going to be marginalized because of this hybrid-type scoring, but I’m not going to make any apologies for it. It’s something I really love to do and it’s a different skill set. I know some of these moments in films, some of these guys think it doesn’t require as much musicianship and musical skill, and sure-could be at times. But what we’re trying to do is further a film’s story and help connect viewer’s emotionally to it, so for me it doesn’t matter what it is, what matters is that it means something and that it has some sort of reason within the story. Given the case of this film, because there is this mutation happening and there’s so much technology involved, going a little bit electronic, and/or going a little bit in-between where I take organic sounds and make them a little bit more electronic, I really think it makes sense. A lot of people score films just based solely on the region, with instruments from that region, and we really tried to do that PLUS show what was happening technology-wise and what was happening on the projector.

**MS:** One of the things that stood out to me, seeing the film and then hearing the score, is the sequence of the music and the progression. Since I’m familiar with the sequence of the story-with that establishing shot we see of the spaceship, we hear an African singer, and for me it became sort of the motif of their plight, what they’d been subjected to. So that by the time certain things are happening, or when that voice comes over action, or when the aliens are in danger, it became more like I’m feeling for these aliens. It drew me into their plight and helped me remember who they are, that they are aliens in an alien world. Was that part of your reasoning in using a human voice to be the motif for the aliens?

**CS:** Absolutely. At a certain point in the film, when Wikus stops calling them prawns and starts calling them creatures, and he has a moment, too, when he realizes he can’t just call them this derogatory name. He’s growing as a character, he’s growing as a person, he sees what he’s been doing wrong. We really just decided-we tried lots of different lead-in sequences to create this common thread, to deal with this common need for resolution, and the voice kept coming back. Neill would say, “Try it with voice over here and voice over there.” He was right most of the time; it really did help. I’m glad it connected for you.

**MS:** It definitely did. Now about working with Neill, because you have worked together before, do you kind of have a shorthand because he knows what you can do and you know what he wants, you guys can communicate better? And tell me what you found after doing the five years of working in television and whatnot. Like you said, you didn’t realize when you first heard this music, you weren’t just writing what you wanted-how do you balance getting what you want to get across musically while still pleasing the director?

**CS:** It’s always a balancing act. A lot of times it’s a good sales pitch (laughs)  but in this case, I knew Neill, and I’ve known him for probably seven years, eight years, and I know what he likes. The first three weeks were pretty challenging, just instrumentation-wise; we were having a real tough time just figuring out what we wanted to use, but in the end, scoring-wise, I knew what he would want to have come across. Once I got scoring after those first three weeks, we really did click, and it was just full steam ahead, so yeah, it’s a lot of fun working with him. He’s just great; he’s become an incredibly good storyteller. A good friend, Julian Clark, was the video editor on it as well, and Julian and I have a great working relationship. So it was the three of us going back and forth, because they were still editing when I was doing the work on it.

Those are the dream scenarios, when you have people that you are friends with, you know they’re extremely talented and they’re passionate about what they’re working on. It makes it a lot easier for you to take liberties, because they believe in you as well-it’s a real give-and-take relationship. And  yeah: it’s awesome working with Neill.

**MS:** Now, I’m curious-I tend to see sound as color, or texture. One of the things you do, especially in the opening sequence, you kind of give us the breadth of the story and what’s going on, the scope of it, but then you use a lot of string instruments to try to create the tension and the pacing of what’s going to be happening. Tell me about that, what your thoughts were, and why you made the decisions you did.

**CS:** The first third really was the trickiest part because there’s so much dialogue, so many cut scenes, so many interviews, so the music really had to give tastes of what’s to come in the film without giving away too much, without leaning on the viewer too much, and without laying on top of the dialogue. So I really did try to leave a lot of gaps, so that it would just kind of pulse in and out, and just keep the story moving forward. The percussion is more-we had it temped with a piece of really frenetic, fast piece of music, and I went completely counter to that. I really felt that it needed to chug along and get people into the story so that people could really listen to what these characters are saying.

The strings were-I would say (laughs), “kind of inspired” by *The Thing* from Morricone, which I just love. It’s one of my favorites of all time-great score. So, it was just more of a feeling kind of thing, I didn’t give too much deep thought into what the strings were going to be within the story. I knew that we were going to be having an orchestra later in the film, but I always feel like you want to introduce snippets, bits and pieces of elements that you’re going to be working in later, just to kind of set it up, to give the people kind of a pallet of sound that they’re going to get through the main titles.

**MS:** It’s interesting, again, because I’m a sci-fi fan and a movie soundtrack fan, I’ve seen more and more of late. I don’t know if it’s a trend or whatever, but I see that scoring for science fiction is less likely to use completely orchestral (as in *Star Wars*) or completely electronic music. To get a more percussive element, I thought you even used the strings in a percussive way. Was that a conscious choice to kind of keep in line with the African instrumentation, too, or was it, just as you said, inspired by *The Thing*?

**CS:** Yeah, you know, there was no specific decision made there-you just kind of write away and stuff comes out, and that’s pretty much how it came out there. You know, when they’re escaping back after the big break-in to MNU, they’re making their way to District 9, that’s much more percussive. It’s just to keep the energy going, and I guess you’re right, it would just be more in keeping with the percussion and the fact that it’s a percussion-based score.

**MS:** Well, I’m a fan, so what’s next for you, and what was the most rewarding part of doing this?

**CS:** The most rewarding part was being able to experience this with a lot of other people who got the same kind of break I did; we’re talking about a first-time feature director, the first time that he and his writing partner, Terri Tatchell, had penned a feature script, first time actors, the first feature of a DP friend of mine, who’d just done commercials up to this point. The video editor, Julian Clarke, and myself, we were the guys who had the most experience, but nothing this high caliber or this big a deal, so the most rewarding part was that we all got to do this together. And thanks to Peter Jackson for letting Neill make all the decisions himself and having faith in him  and that we were able to pull it off, you know? It’s really hard to make a good movie, and I hope we’ve made a really good sci-fi [film]. I think we have, and it sure seems like everybody else thinks so, (yourself included, thank you!). So yeah, I would say that’s the most rewarding part of this, absolutely.

As for things in the future, I’ve been getting calls and e-mails  (laughs) but, uh, we’ll know soon. I can’t say anything just yet, but believe me, I’m looking forward to getting the next thing going.

**MS:** All right, last question: tell me, who are some of your favorite film composers?

**CS:** Oh man  there are so many. Well, like I said, the guys who really got me into it were Mark Isham and Thomas Newman. I really keyed in with Thomas Newman just because I felt like he was doing a lot of experimentation with instrumentation, and I’ve always found it fascinating to see and hear what he was going to come up with. It was never a case of me not liking or appreciating full orchestral film scores-they’re phenomenal. For me musically, where I came from, my background, it just spoke more to me, and that’s what drew me toward film music. So those two guys, I would say, were the beginnings of it all, but you know, I have an iPod that’s just jam-packed; I just rotate through things every week.

For more info on Clinton visit : [www.clintonshorter.com](http://www.clintonshorter.com/)