



MICHAEL STEVENS
The Whole Picture

“JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN WRITE MUSIC THAT SOUNDS like a film score, it doesn’t make you a film composer,” observes multi-instrumentalist Michael Stevens. “Obviously you have to know a lot about orchestration and sequencing, because most people want to hear a temporary cue before you go to record an orchestra. But the most important ability is probably people skills. Being able to work with groups of people as a team. That, and being able to start over and do something else if the director doesn’t like it!”

Stevens has been writing music for films since 1990, including a six-year stint with industry legend Hans Zimmer. He has also contributed to numerous Clint Eastwood films—from a song for the 1990 cop thriller *The Rookie* to the score for 2006 war epic *Letters from Iwo Jima*, to his most recent work, the score for *Gran Torino*—all composed in collaboration with his most frequent partner, jazz musician Kyle Eastwood.

After learning piano and drums at an early age, Stevens attended the University of Miami, where he studied classical guitar before transferring to USC to continue his musical education. The change of locale brought a wealth of new musical opportunities—starting when Michael crossed paths with Clint Eastwood’s son Kyle, also a USC student. “We met playing pool with a bunch of friends,” Stevens recalls. “I had a studio set up in my dorm room with a four-track recorder, and everybody would come back to my room to jam, with Kyle on bass guitar. Eventually, my room became more of a recording studio than a place of study!”

Stevens and Eastwood eventually left USC to form a jazz-fusion trio with keyboard player Alex Wurman (now also a film composer and producer). The trio recorded an album and toured Europe, though the record deal they’d hoped for never materialized. But Michael soon ran across another extraordinary musical opportunity: working with Hans Zimmer on film music.

“I’m able to do most everything I need to show to producers or directors on Yamaha equipment. It’s kind of a one-stop shop!”



"It was an amazing fluke," he says. "This guy I knew from my hometown near Chicago said, 'You know what? I'm leaving this job—I haven't slept for two years. But you'd be perfect.' So he recommended me to Hans. It was just three of us: Hans, his engineer, and myself. I came on at *Thelma and Louise* in 1990; then we did *Backdraft*, then some other big movies, one after another. Hans Zimmer is not only a great composer, but a great producer. I learned my engineering and production chops from him."

Given his engineering know-how, it's no wonder that Stevens chose the powerful but compact Yamaha 01V96VCM Digital Mixing Console for his own studio. In fact, he uses two of them linked together. "I like the compatibility and the portability of being able to take them to different cities to write," he says. "This mixer gives me the flexibility to take a rig anywhere. I have my studio in Paris, and a room in London, and a studio in Bel Air where I do the Clint Eastwood stuff and produce the Kyle Eastwood records. And I use the Yamaha gear everywhere I go."



Stevens also has a pair of 88-key Motif XS8 keyboards. "It's a great-feeling electronic keyboard, and it has loads of great internal sounds," he says. "I love all the pianos, and there's lots of great percussion. I use two Motifs: one in front of the sequencer, for myself, and another one perpendicular to mine. That way, when I'm collaborating with another person, they have the freedom to play ideas without my having to get up and let them sit in the driver's seat."

In fact, that second Motif is often manned by Clint Eastwood himself, Michael says. "On certain films, like *Flags of Our Fathers*, he'll start with his own idea, and we'll develop it from his basic theme. He writes melodies that work great with the picture. So yeah, Clint spends quite a bit of time at the guest keyboard!"

Working with a filmmaker who understands music makes things easier, Stevens says. "Rather than trying to control it too much, there's an understanding of improvisation and the importance of letting people stay in the flow. Once he sees you're on the right track, he just lets you go. It helps to have someone like Clint, who knows what he wants."

In addition to two upcoming Clint Eastwood projects, Stevens is currently working on a film called *Fortuna*, directed by Barthélémy Grossman and starring Dominic Monaghan. And as usual, he'll be relying on his Yamaha gear to compose and deliver the music. "I'm able to do the whole job, most everything I need to show to producers or directors, on Yamaha equipment," he says. "It's kind of a one-stop shop!"