

In memory of World War II : Composer scores special video game

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Sean Murray wanted to show how war affects soldiers. So the Hollywood Hills composer, an Edison, N.J., native who grew up in Montecito, used industrial, grunge and heavy metal sounds to illustrate the psychology in his score for the new video game, "Call of Duty: World at War."

The shooter game takes place in both the Pacific and European theaters of World War II, and Mr. Murray, son of Santa Barbara movie star and director Don Murray, went to Prague, the Czech Republic, in June for the orchestral recording. Emilie Bernstein of Santa Barbara, daughter of the late legendary Ojai composer Elmer Bernstein, went there too as the orchestrator, preparing the parts for the instrumental sections. The game is being released in stores today, Veterans Day, Mr. Murray said by phone from Los Angeles. Kiefer Sutherland ("24") and Gary Oldman star as the voices of U.S. Marine Sgt. Roebuck and a Russian commander, respectively, in the Activision game, which was developed by Treyarch.



Sean Murray, who grew up in Montecito, has scored music for TV shows such as "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and video games such as "True Crime: Streets of L.A." His latest work is for "Call of Duty: World at War," a World War II video game.
COURTESY OF SEAN MURRAY

"It was an amazing experience," said Mr. Murray, who has scored two other video games ("True Crimes: Streets of L.A." and "True Crimes: New York City"), as well as 40 movies and five TV shows such as "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." "I was really excited to work on this one. It's a very historically accurate game."

Mr. Murray said he was excited to record the "Call of Duty" score with the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. He watched the four days of recording from the control booth and offered suggestions to the conductor. "On the fourth day, we had a 25-piece choir (the City of Prague Philharmonic Choir)."

The city held special meaning for Mr. Murray because it was the hometown of his wife, Lucie's, stepfather, Rudi Freimuth.

When Mr. Murray was growing up in Montecito, he lived near Mr. Freimuth and later met him again when Mr. Murray was in his 30s in the 1990s. The second time around is when he learned in detail about the man's military history.

Mr. Freimuth left Czechoslovakia, fought the Nazis with the Free Czechs in France and then escaped from France to England in a rowboat after Germany conquered France. Mr. Freimuth returned on D-Day as a tank commander in the British army, and he held the Nazis off at Dunkirk, France, Mr. Murray said.

Working on "Call of Duty," said Mr. Murray, meant a lot to him because of the heroic stories he heard from Mr. Freimuth. "He was such a decent person who lived such a normal life after all that. He was very popular with the veterans' association in Santa Barbara."

Mr. Freimuth died in 2005 at age 86.

When searching for a sound for the "Call of Duty" score, Mr. Murray, whose movie scores include "Ocean Tribe" (1997) and the upcoming "Junkyard Dogs," said he tried to go contemporary. "We didn't want it to sound like 'Saving Private Ryan,'" he said.

"We wanted to modernize it a bit and make it fun for young kids playing the game."

At the same time, Mr. Murray said, he was trying to show how the destruction from war affects a soldier psychologically. He did that by starting out with the typical patriotic themes of war movies. "We were trying to show a soldier's psychology from his state of mind, when it's the beginning of the battle and when you're optimistic and have a patriotic zeal," he said.

But when the combat becomes intense, the soldier's mood becomes darker, and the music changes to reflect that, with heavy metal, grunge and industrial music sounds, Mr. Murray said. "It's a little bit of Nine Inch Nails."

The music becomes triumphant again when the Russians invade Germany and help to end the war with their conquest of the Reichstag, the German Parliament. He said that portion of his score sounds similar to the Red Army Choir.

The Pacific theater portion of the game shows the challenges that the U.S. forces faced in Okinawa and Peleliu Island, Mr. Murray said. He explained he tried to use his score to show the feeling of guerilla warfare, something new to the American forces at the time. "I tried to get across the idea that Americans are fighting in the alien jungle world."

He used powerful Japanese taiko drums and Japanese flutes in the score. To represent the American forces, he brought out the brass.

"For the American side, there's nothing better than trumpets and French horns; they're so symbolic of American themes," Mr. Murray said.

As he scored "Call of Duty," Mr. Murray played the game to get a feel for it.

"You're shooting at people; it's so realistic. You come across a booby trap; you're blown up in it. You have snipers coming at you," he said.

"It was refreshing," he said about scoring the game.

"I always have fun, no matter what I'm working on, but this was a different creative experience." As he talked, Mr. Murray sounded like his father, Don Murray, who starred with Marilyn Monroe in "Bus Stop" (1956) and worked on many other films as a star and director.

"People are always getting us mixed up on the phone," Mr. Murray said. "People say, 'Don,' and I say, 'No, it's Sean.' "

As a child, Mr. Murray said he enjoyed hanging out on the sets of his dad's movies, including "Conquest of the Planet of the Apes" (1972). "I hung out with Roddy McDowell." Mr. McDowell played Caesar, the chimpanzee leading the revolt against the humans in the fourth "Apes" movie, and Don Murray played the villainous Gov. Breck, the human trying to oppress the apes. Today Don Murray, 79, continues to work as an actor and director, and he lives in Santa Barbara with his wife, Elizabeth, Sean's mother. Sean Murray is writing the score for his father's latest movie, "The Hard Ride," which is set for a 2009 release. Don Murray plays Justice Shannon in the Western, which is set in 1876 in the notorious town of Deadwood in the Dakota territory.

Sean Murray said he decided to become a film composer at age 8 when he was on the set of one of his father's movies. He said Mr. Bernstein encouraged him, and he got his on-the-job training when, from ages 16 to 19, he scored movies for Brooks Institute of Photography students in Santa Barbara. His first professional job was scoring the movie "Scorpion" in 1987.

More recently, he scored "Breathe," a film that his father directed. It premiered in 2006 at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

"It's a true story based on Santa Barbara resident Tom Campbell, who was stranded in an underwater cave at Santa Cruz Island," Mr. Murray said.

The music, said Mr. Murray, was intended to capture the alien world of the sea.

FYI

"Call of Duty: World at War," the fifth game in the "Call of Duty" series, is being released today in electronic and video stores, as well as large outlets such as Walmart and Target. The Activision game, which can be played on Playstation, Xbox 360 and other formats, sells for \$59.99, according to composer Sean Murray. For more information go to www.callofduty.com.