

Thank you for the music

[Jasmine Onstad](#) explores *Big Little Lies* and the power of the soundtrack

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Image: HBO

After the buzz around HBO's *Big Little Lies* last year, its domination at the Golden Globes was no surprise. Wearing black and Time's Up badges to collect their awards, all those involved could not escape the poignancy of this show in the context of the current state of the entertainment industry. Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman's women-centric project brought together an incredible cast and crew, coupled with a brilliant plot based around Liane Moriarty's book of the same name.

The show's grim fairytale is centred around five main protagonists, all of whom are mothers with first grade children attending a prestigious school in the wealthy Monterey area of coastal California. Layers are ripped away from the picture-perfect lives of these women over seven expertly crafted episodes, and the story goes into some very dark places. Imagine *Desperate Housewives* but as a cinematic masterpiece with meaty, frustratingly flawed characters.

The tale of complex female relationships, which explores battles with shame and abuse, could not be more timely, and the Golden Globes awards speeches were unsurprisingly politically charged. There are many things that had to perfectly come together to make this show such a success: the jaw-dropping Californian location, the talented cinematic direction, the grouping of such a stellar cast and the innovative editing. On top of all this, one thing that really stands out in this show is its use of music.



Image: Disney

A perfectly crafted soundtrack is something that, if done well, can elevate a good piece of work to greatness. Unlike a score, which is written and orchestrated especially for a film or TV show, soundtracks curate licensed music to accompany scenes and can often take center stage. Once attached to a character or scene, a song can take on a whole new meaning and a whole new set of emotions. The upbeat 'Stuck in the Middle with You' by Stealers Wheel will now be forever associated with the iconic torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs*. Who knows if 'All Star' by Smash Mouth would have ever been a milestone of meme culture if a whole generation hadn't associated it with a grumpy green ogre? And who doesn't think of Chris Pratt getting tazed by a prison guard when they hear 'Hooked on a Feeling' by Blue Swede in *Guardians of the Galaxy*? The Marvel blockbuster's soundtrack was an unlikely success and took the charts by storm, becoming platinum even though it was a mix of songs that people had only ever heard on the radio and probably didn't know the name of.

Brilliant scores have always been applauded in the entertainment industry, whether it is the work of John Williams or Ennio Morricone. Film composers have had their fair share of spotlight and acclaim in awards shows and in the public eye. The hard work of the humble music supervisor, however, has long been kept in the shadows. But for the first time last year, the Emmys decided to create an award for Outstanding Music Supervision, finally recognising its integral part in storytelling. In a category containing supervisors from *Master of None* and *Better Call Saul*, the winner was Susan Jacobs for her work on *Big Little Lies*.

The episode nominated was the season finale, which contained an eclectic mix of perfectly picked songs from across the musical spectrum. The culmination of the series is met with the sound of a haunting cover of the Rolling Stones' 'You Can't Always Get What You Want' by Ituna, summing up the *Big Little Lies* central idea: the age-old truth that money cannot buy happiness.

There's a lot more to the job than picking out your favorite tunes from your Spotify playlist. The music supervisor has to liaise with producers and directors in order to create moments which truly push the story forwards, as well as having a good legal mind when it comes to negotiating publishing rights.

They also have to have extreme empathy to be able to get into the character's mind and truly understand the emotions being experienced. The musical palette created by a supervisor is not only important for heightening the audience's response, but can take into account a character's whole story arc. In an interview with Vox, Thomas Golubic (who was nominated for a Music Supervision Emmy for *Better Call Saul* and has previously worked on *Breaking Bad*) differentiates the role of a supervisor and a composer. "In many ways, the composer's role... is to be in the chair of the audience. Whereas the supervisors are very much crafting and arcing out ideas that we are changing and revising as we go."

Finding music that is both relevant to the story and timeless is not an easy task and was something that was almost integral to the process of putting *Big Little Lies* together for director Jean-Marc Vallée. From the subtle but unnerving clicking of the police reporter's zippo lighter to the dreamlike silence of the flashbacks, every single sound is carefully measured and premeditated. It is no surprise then, that the music fits so perfectly with the story and the character development.

What differentiates the *Big Little Lies* soundtrack from so many other great film and TV soundtracks is the connection with reality injected into every choice of song. No music ever plays if a character is not playing it themselves or in a situation where there is music in the background. The result is that the music becomes a bigger plot device than just elevating the emotional impact of the scene. It tells the story.

A great example is the use of Neil Young music in the abusive relationship between Celeste (Kidman) and Perry (Alexander Skarsgård). Earlier on in the series when the audience is still not fully aware of the extent of Perry's abuse, he romantically plays 'Harvest Moon' and they dance together as a loving couple. Later on, when Perry is beating Celeste to a pulp, the music leaking out of their son's headphones in the next room is Neil Young, a detail so minute it is almost impossible to notice. To really get into his characters' psyche and piece them together, Vallée even goes so far as to create playlists for each of his characters before he starts filming. This meticulous music curation does something that a score simply cannot do.

There is no denying the breathtaking beauty of a well composed score, but it is worth pointing out the groundbreaking creativity in some soundtracks. Where a score transports you into an elevated state and subconsciously tricks you into caring for the story unveiling before your eyes, a soundtrack connects with an audience on their own terms. Instead of pulling the audience into another world, it brings a bit of the familiar into fiction. Just as we all tie particular songs to the high and low points of our lives, an effective soundtrack can tie a song to a particular moment in television or cinema, from which it can never be detached.



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