



# The Flight

**JOHN BROOMHALL** meets the award-winning composition team behind Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* blockbuster game, *Odyssey*

Joe Henson and Alexis Smith have scored a hat trick of global videogame music successes with their respected scores for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, *Alien: Isolation* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the latter garnering them an Ivor Novello award along with co-

composer Joris de Man. But their creative roots were first planted in the music business with Smith having cut his teeth working for renowned record producer and music director Marius de Vries, whilst Henson was touring the world as bass player for then festival-favourite

The Freestylers. When they eventually met through an album project of Henson's, something clicked and a working relationship began to develop further, until they decided to solidify the partnership with a joint production set-up in buzzing East London and a collective moniker. 'The Flight' was born, as was a growing interest in the world of game music. Fortunately, their work in records opened doors with videogame publishing giant Electronic Arts. At the time, EA were looking for a game score that would sound like licensed music tracks — a perfect match — which set them on a firm trajectory towards top-drawer videogame scoring, whilst they also continued writing and producing records and TV scores.

**Congratulations on *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. It's a hugely popular game franchise to write music for. How did it come about and how was it for you?**

**Alexis Smith (AS):** We worked with audio director Lydia Andrew previously on the multiplayer portion of *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*. Liking what we did on that, she gave us the opportunity to pitch for *Odyssey*.

**Joe Henson (JH):** And in a blind test, we got picked. Ironic, as when I originally saw the brief, I thought "no way", this isn't our thing at all.

**AS:** Whereas my response was "yes way" — this is completely our thing — and I could imagine old Greek instruments sounding great used in a modern way. I love old folk music from disparate cultures — it really connects with me. It's been a fantastic project. Lydia's amazing — the detail she goes to. For instance, whilst we were beavering away on the main score, she was busy finding authentic musicians in Greece to record the source music you hear played by characters in the game. She commissioned especially written songs whose



/ Using an Ebow on a dulcimer

lyrics were translated into and recorded in ancient Greek!

**JH:** We went out and bought a ton of old esoteric stringed instruments — dulcimers and lyres and a rebec — and hired in some gifted players to bring them to life. Plus we have three shelves of weird assorted percussion collected along the way. We've found Lydia and her music supervisor Jerome Angelot two of the most respectful, creative and inspiring people we've ever worked for — which is very important when you're creating four hours of completely finished music in 14 months, much of it breaking down to loads of relatively short cues. It's the biggest scope of project we've ever worked on, and in the game it's even more than four hours because we deliver stems which Jerome will subsequently re-use, remix and re-purpose in other parts of the game. They need to do that, given that some people will play this game for 70 hours or more...

**How does delivering stems affect your workflow for mixing and mastering and generally how do you stay consistent — do you have template sessions you use over and over which are effectively substantially pre-mixed?**

**AS:** There are three different relative music loudness levels, from full-on combat to low level intensity exploring music, with a middle intensity level in-between. It can be difficult



**/ Some unusual percussion was recorded for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey***

when you're producing and mixing over months to keep consistency but in reality the first two or three pieces in each category become the benchmarks. You set some rules at the beginning and make sure you stick to them. On a stereo mix, naturally I'll include our standard mastering chain but not on the separate stems. Instead I give Jerome our mastering chain information so he can replicate our final mixes at his end then manipulate them from there.

**JH:** We have a template insofar as there's a

mixer set-up with sends to our favourite reverbs and delays, but we don't fix anything else — there's no giant instrument palette set in advance. For us, selecting sounds as we go is very much part of the creative process — trying new things and being open to new ideas is important, so we want a modus operandi that forces that to happen. That said, there will be commonality of musical elements across certain groups of cues, perhaps linked to a particular game character or location. ▶



### Tell us about your workspace and set-up...

**JH:** We purposely picked a really bustling part of east London for our studio. We saw it as almost part of our studio spec for it to be surrounded with a vibrant life outside — people, restaurants and bars galore. I think we'd go potty cooped up in a beige windowless studio buried in the countryside. We agreed that was a no-no and found this amazing space — a cooperage in the Truman Brewery where they used to make barrels for the beer. It has massive windows and ridiculously high ceilings. When empty, it sounded absolutely terrible! But we filled it with books and instruments, equipment (and us), plus laid down a carpet and it works fine technically — we've never had any complaints about our mix output.

**AS:** If you do a creative job, your head has got to be in the right place. You've got to take care of yourself. The workspace is completely central to that.

On the equipment side of things, our monitoring is all Dynaudio BM8s. They're honest but not too honest — not too flattering either! You can sit in a sweet spot getting the direct sound and it works great — we know them really well now, so we'll stick with them until we die. I actually do a lot of mixing on Beyerdynamic DT880s, the 'headphones of truth'. We swear by them and they're very comfortable to wear over long periods. We've just upgraded to Mac trash cans to run Logic, which we've been on since day one. Audio interfaces are UAD and we like their plug-ins

plus those in Logic. Our main gear is comprised of lots of analogue synths, guitars and other instruments — and a ton of fx pedals. We're generally all in the box for processing but we do like mucking about with our pedal collection.

### And what about your general modus operandi and approach to work and projects?

**AS:** In recent years, music and composing has become an ever more solitary pursuit, partly because technology enables one person to do so much and also in the face of decreasing budgets, due to economic necessity. It's a way of life we both tried but we both felt we were missing something. We like being part of a team and the joy of discovering something together you wouldn't find individually.

**JH:** We're more interested in longevity — a steady career working behind the scenes — than having a brief moment of stardom. We both know we'd be pretty useless at doing anything else so we want to be in it for the long term. We enjoy ourselves, have a laugh and make time for our families — this job should be fun and exciting — it's a magical thing to do. So something is wrong if you're exhausted from pulling all-nighters and working every weekend. We've seen plenty of other people burn out, so we don't do crazy long hours — usually ten till six with a proper lunch break. Also, we just don't argue about stuff — if one of us isn't



/ Joe Henson (L) & Alexis Smith are The Flight

convinced about something no problem. We stay focused on getting the job done not butting heads.

**AS:** To us, the time we're not in the studio is just as important for creativity and productivity as the time we are there... On a practical level, working together means we can tag-team and

police each other's stuff — for example, we might work on two different sessions on two different set-ups developing ideas at the beginning of a project, then switch and carry on where the other person left off. There's a lot of skills cross-over between us but also some key individual strengths. I tend to do most of the mixing for instance.

### Looking back, what do you think has made The Flight successful?

**JH:** We try and make our music always have a heart.

**AS:** It usually starts with a human being playing

an instrument — that first musical element — that beginning — is something that's real and alive.

**JH:** We like simplicity, sometimes naiveté, and we rather celebrate inconsistency and things being a little rough around the edges — not broken, but a bit raw. And we really, really like being part of a team which is why we love working on games — we like that deep relationship with the game developer. We're very organised, serious and passionate about what we do — however, we don't take ourselves too seriously. After all, in the end it's just music! 

[www.theflightmusicofficial.com](http://www.theflightmusicofficial.com)

## Games

### Abridged Credits

**Assassin's Creed: Odyssey** — Ubisoft (composer)

**Horizon Zero Dawn** — Guerrilla Games/ Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (composer)

**Alien: Isolation** — Sega/Creative Assembly (composer)

**Little Big Planet 3** — Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (composer)

**Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag** — Multiplayer — Ubisoft (composer)

## TV

### Abridged Credits

**Drugsland** — BBC1

**Kids on the Edge** — Channel 4

**No Man Left Behind** — National Geographic

**Ripper Street** — BBC1 (music production and arranging)

**Monroe** — ITV (additional music composition)

**The Great American Manhunt** — National Geographic

**Horizon: A Decade Of The Human**

**Genome** — BBC2

**Storryville: Cage Fighting Women** — BBC4

**The Long Way Round** — Sky Travel (additional music composition)

## AWARDS

**Horizon Zero Dawn**

**Ivor Novello Awards 2018:** Winner of Best Original Video Game Score

**BAFTA Games Awards 2018:** Nomination for Best Music

**Dutch Game Awards 2017:** Winner of Best Music & Audio

**Jerry Goldsmith Awards 2017:** Winner of Best Original Score in a Video Game

**BAFTA Games Awards 2015:** Nomination for Best Music — *Alien Isolation*