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May 13, 2026 7:00am PT

'Heated Rivalry' Showrunner Jacob Tierney and His Music Team on Scoring Sex Scenes, and Why Including T.A.T.u.'s 'All the Things She Said' Was a 'F— You to Russia'

By Jem Aswad ▾



There's been no shortage of raves and praise for "[Heated Rivalry](#)," [Crave-HBO Max's surprise hit hockey romance](#) — for its premise, its writing, its stars and, refreshingly, its music, which is effectively a character in the show and has ignited or reignited the careers of multiple musicians, many of them Canadian.

Like the show itself, which explores the taboo sexual relationship between Canadian player Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Russian star Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), the music is un-obvious: The score, by Montreal-based singer-songwriter Peter Peter — who had never written for film or television before — moves and accentuates the action and emotion but is never obtrusive, and the songs featured in the show are equally left of center.

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Wolf Parade and Feist, two veterans of the Canadian alt-rock wave of the mid-'00s, both have had two songs featured prominently in key scenes (and have seen their streaming numbers skyrocket); French-Canadian artists like Phillipe B and Satine have major syncs; songs by two British acts, alt outfit Wet Leg and singer-songwriter Harrison, get big looks as well. While showrunner [Jacob Tierney](#) is a big music fan and had a few songs in mind — and even wrote Wolf Parade's "I'll Believe in Anything" into the script — he largely left the work to fellow Canadians Peter and music supervisor Scotty Taylor.

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"Scoring the Moment: Inside the Sound of 'Heated Rivalry,'" a panel discussion about the show's music — featuring Tierney (on a break from writing Season 2), Peter and Taylor, and moderated by *Variety's* Jem Aswad — was a highlight of last week's Departure Festival and Conference in Toronto, and found all three going into great detail about the show's remarkable score and music choices: how and why they were selected, and, not least, the message and intentions behind the controversial choice of Russian duo T.A.T.u's 2002 hit "All the Things She Said." That song is featured at length in a pivotal scene that combines its original version and Harrison's 2022 cover; its original video featured then-scandalous (and very

awkward) girl-on-girl kissing by T.A.T.u.'s teenaged singers, but has since been disavowed by both of the women involved, adding to the subtext of homophobia in Russia that the show explores in depth.

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Highlights from the discussion appear below, edited for clarity.

“Scoring the Moment: Inside the Sound of ‘Heated Rivalry’” panel discussion at Departure Festival + Conference (Photo: Mike Highfield)

Jacob, what was your vision for the show’s music?

Tierney: I always have music playing when I write, and I was writing this show to Peter’s album “Ether,” in particular. I had been a huge fan of his for many years, and “Ether,” if any of you know Peter’s music, is quite different: It was so

interesting for me to watch somebody who had basically been making a kind of bedroom pop move into electronic music. There's an earnestness to it, a romance to it, a heart-on-your-sleeve quality that I absolutely love.

So I reached out to him very early on, I think before any of the other creative collaborators, and said, "Would you even be interested in doing this?" Because sometimes [scoring] isn't on somebody's radar, and also, it's six one hour [episodes] of TV, which is a fuck-ton of music, and some people would not be up to that task. Also, I knew he hadn't done this before, so I wanted to give him a chance to think about it and, frankly, to back out, if he was overwhelmed by the amount of work. But luckily, he was very receptive to it.

And then Scotty came on at the normal point in production. There were certain songs already in the script, but again, it's six hours of TV — there's so much music in a television show like this.

What kind of music did you tell them you wanted?

Nothing specific. It was more about “Does this [music] work for this particular moment?” But songs were in the script — Wolf Parade was in there, Feist was in there, the Satine song, the Alfa Rococo song, so I was like, “go from there.” I think that Scotty was initially surprised by how many female artists I wanted, that it wasn’t more male or queer kind of male voices. But it really was more about finding the right song for a moment, not for the whole show.

Peter, your role is to basically soundtrack the emotions and the action of the film. And the music for the sex scenes evolves as the show goes on — first it’s kind of Kraftwerk-ish, but it becomes more tender as their feelings for each other grow. Was that something you intended to do?

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Peter: Yeah, I guess I was. I was having a hard time trying to imagine the [music for the sex scenes]. At first I thought it would be a lot of action, with fast editing and that kind of thing, so I was leaning towards techno for those scenes. But I sent demos to Jacob and it was used by the editors [in early cuts], and when I saw it with the up-tempo techno on the intimate scenes, I was like, “Oh no, I’m ruining everything here!” So I just started again from scratch, and it was really love-based more than anything — more about two people being together. I just wanted to keep their intimacy with something warm.

Jacob Tierney (Photo: Steph Montani)

STEPH MONTANI

Tierney: I think Peter understood kind of instinctively that even though the first two episodes might not feel like it, there's a bait-and-switch to this show where it does the opposite of what most romance does — it leads with sex and then gets to feelings. I think people were initially surprised by the gut punch at the end of episode two, when you're like, "Oh, I didn't even know they had feelings for each

other.” It’s not clear that there *are* feelings, but as the storytellers, we had to be laying that groundwork so that by the time you get to episodes five and six, which are so emotional, that you’re in a place where you’re receptive to that and you feel like you’re still watching the same show. And that to me was the kind of beauty of the ultimate, like, queerness of this show is that like we start with sex and then we get to feelings. It’s not a narratively traditional way to go with love, but I think it’s very relatable for queer people, especially gay men.

Scotty, the soundtrack is not obvious either — with one exception that we’ll talk about in a minute — but it’s also very Canada-centric: Even when the New York team wins the championship, we hear Wolf Parade! Was that because the show was originally only going to be broadcast in Canada at first, or were you being patriotic? (Laughter)

Taylor: All of that. We knew some songs were in the script, and then I was trying to get lines in the sand from Jacob, like, “Where do we want to go exactly? Do we want to focus on queer male?” But we decided, let’s see what feels right and what fits the scene. And yes, we wanted to include Canadian artists, but it was like about the song making sense, not necessarily a mandate.

But you have Wet Leg opening episode two with “Mange Tout” — the song fits the scene perfectly, the lyrics are super sexy and there’s even a line about, er, bottom feeders. But it doesn’t fit the early-2010s time frame. Was the song just irresistible?

Tierney: I didn’t give a shit about the time frame, I just love that song and it was the right kind of anarchic and queer [combination for the scene]. All kinds of things factor into why you pick a song — there are great songs that just don’t work for a moment, and there are songs where you’re like, I don’t love that but it really works.

But with “Mange Tout,” I love the song and I love the attitude of it. There’s a spicy fuck-you to it that felt very Ilya to me. So I just said to Scotty “I want!” — and I didn’t think we’d get it because it was brand new.

Taylor: Well, your appreciation for music is why we’re here. “You want a song like that?” “No, I want *that* song!” OK, let me figure it out!

Tierney: That’s also part of why “Ether” was so great to write to, it was the perfect way into this. I would describe that album the way I would describe the show — the bait-and-switch of that album is you think it’s this hard electronic album, but by

the time you get to [the song] “Lisbonne” you’re like, this is the most romantic album ever, and that’s exactly the evolution I wanted out of the show.

But on the other hand, there’s an episode in the new season that will be almost entirely done to Mozart’s “Requiem,” and one of the most important cues to me in the show is [Beethoven’s] “Moonlight Sonata.” There are moments where you want to tap into the collective memory of something like that — the impact of what we all associate with [a piece of music] is part of the job of a song. That’s also why you can’t just throw in a Rolling Stones song or something — it has too much baggage. It’s part of the reason why I love French pop so much, because I know that my primary audience is English-speaking, and the lyrics won’t get in the way. The last thing I want is a sad song with “I’m sad” as a lyric and then I’m watching a guy cry — I get it! And then there’s the ultimate factor — right, Scotty? — of what can I afford?

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Peter Peter (Photo: Steph Montani)

STEPH MONTANI

Actually, what you're saying about baggage plays into the one fairly obvious song choice: T.A.T.u's "All the Things She Said," which is perfect for the scene where it's used, but has a lot of baggage and a very complicated backstory: T.A.T.u. were two teenaged Russian women who kiss

in the song's video. It was scandalous at the time but they don't look like they're enjoying it at all —

Tierney: They sure don't, it's horrible.

And they have since made some anti-LGBTQ comments over the years. So why that song, knowing all the baggage that comes with it?

Tierney: I mean, honestly, I resisted that song because it's so... *(he pauses)*. That song came about very late in the process, and then it was very scary because "How the fuck are we going to actually pay for it?" We're still paying for that song spiritually. *(Laughter)* But we wanted Russian music, and I, of course, wanted queer stuff wherever I could. And finally, I was like, well, frankly, there's only one big hit in this department that also works in a nightclub [scene] — and it's that song. And that song's [ownership] is shady as fuck — who knows who owns it? It is deeply complicated, it is unpleasant in a lot of ways — and it just worked so fucking well [in the scene].

I think there was enough of a kind of fuck-you to Russia in it that I was OK with that part of it: Like it or not, this is a big gay song. And I'm gonna make it even gayer right now! *(Laughter)*

So that was it. Sometimes when you're casting, with actors or with anything, there's an obvious choice. And sometimes you want to run away from it. But then you have to think, just because it's obvious doesn't mean I should run away. Sometimes that is the right decision.

Did the backstory play any role in choosing it or making you not want it? Because the two women in T.A.T.u. disavowed the video.

It did both... but I mean, *of course* they disavowed the song, look at where they live! Russia is a shitshow, and it's a place where we were never going to be releasing this

show, obviously — but it's a massive underground success there, too! And I kind of wanted to do right by humans that live in Russia, and acknowledge that it's a country with a massive cultural footprint, especially in music. There were a lot of things to think about and ultimately we pulled the trigger and decided to do it, but it was not an easy decision.

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Just one more question about that song — if the ownership is so complicated, how did you clear it?

Taylor: Yeah, it was a plate of spaghetti, but you figure it out. I mean, *one* of the versions was going in, even if for a while we were having a tough time with it. And then, you just get everybody on board, which is super difficult in a situation like that.

Tierney: Scotty rolled up his sleeves on that puppy, I'll tell you.

So the conversation was, “Hello, Russian music publisher? We want to use this song for a TV show about gay hockey players?”

Taylor: Yeah! (*Laughter*) Well, you start with topline [description of how the song will be used], and then “Do you need to know more?” I have great relationships

with every label and publisher, and unfortunately with that one, we definitely had to get really granular.

Tierney: Like, “Oh, he’s jerking off in the shower, and then they’re both going to come?!”

Taylor: Actually, I did have some pretty tough talks about it, and finally I was like, “Flip it to a different kind of relationship” [male/female], and I think that did start to move the needle. I was like, “Really? You’re going to lock me out because of the story we’re telling?” And after that, I got some pretty high-level phone calls that were like, “If you really want to do this, we’ll help you figure it out.”

Props for getting it done! Peter, was there anything you listened to that inspired you when you were creating the music for the show? Classical pieces or anything?

Peter: Yeah, there’s one actually. I thought of [Stanley Kubrick’s brilliant 1975 film] “Barry Lyndon” and [its main theme] Handel’s “Sarabande.” I knew that I wanted to create something noble, because when I read the script, I thought it was a quest for love, so I wanted something very elegant for it. The theme of two souls and one soul is inspired vaguely by the harmony of Handel.

But otherwise, no, I was just jamming, reading the script and looking at the footage, I didn’t do deep research on the music side — although I watched “Youngblood” [the 1986 hockey film starring Rob Lowe and Patrick Swayze] and stuff like that. I was like, “Is there good music in ‘Youngblood’?” ... Not really. *(Laughter)*

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Scotty Taylor (Photo: Mike Highfield)

Jacob, were there songs you absolutely had to have?

Tierney: Yeah, “I’ll Believe in Anything.” That was the big one — I’d written dialogue around it, I’d crafted two episodes of TV around that cue. That was the only must-have. The first thing I said to Scott was, “Please clear this song for me right now, because if not, I have to change so many things.”

Was there anything you didn't get that you really wanted?

Taylor: No, I don't think there was, actually.

Tierney: But I also set my expectations where I thought I could achieve them. Like, I wasn't going after \$200,000 songs, right? We weren't like, "Oh, I can't get this Lady Gaga song" — no shade to that music. It's just that I was very aware that "I can't afford that." We had networks saying, "How about some Charlie xcx?" "Sure! Give me the money!"

But also, I didn't want what everybody else was using at the time, and that's the other thing — I didn't want to be a part of "Brat summer"! (*Laughter*) It's great, but we wanted to have our own sound, because we were getting such a bespoke score. That was part of the excitement of working with somebody like Peter — you're getting a score that no one else is going to get because he's never done a score before.

Peter, since this was your first score and you work as a solo artist, have you really had a boss before?

Peter: It's been a while — the last time I was in a video club, like 16 years ago. (*Laughter*) I've been running this career as a songwriter for 15 years and I put a lot of pressure on my shoulders, but Jacob really made me feel in a safe space. It's probably what all creatives want, really, this feeling of trust. It gives a lot of confidence.

Jacob, do you have a bigger budget for the second season?

Tierney: No, I have the same budget for next season, but what I have now is good will — I have people who *want* to be on the show. That's the thing that has changed: The music is being sent to us, artists have reached out and been like, "Please use my song!" That has literally never happened to me before in my many years of

doing this. Usually, you always kind of pitch to a musician, “Well, if you give me the song for like \$5,000, then maybe eight new people will hear it.”

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But this time, it’s like, look what happened with Wolf Parade and Feist and Harrison and look what’s happening to Peter. I just had lunch with Wet Leg and they were like, “It changed everything for this album,” and I was like, that’s fucking amazing. It’s such a thrill for me to be able to see the impact. Frankly, the biggest impact that I saw, especially at first when things were starting to get crazy, was “Holy shit, look at what’s happening with these songs that are 20 years old!”

I’ve known Spencer Krug [of Wolf Parade] for a long time, and he said, “You’ve changed things for us and we’re very grateful.” And I was like, “Music is a huge part of what inspires me, and it’s a really nice feeling to be able to give back.” You never think you’re gonna be able to do something in return.

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