

**In Proximity**  
**Serena Göransson**  
**Season 3 Episode 31**  
**Final Transcript**

[CLIP: MEET DELTA SLIM SCENE, SINNERS DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, PROXIMITY MEDIA 2025]

**Serena Göransson:** From the beginning, Delroy wanted this to be very personal. He shared a story that he's never told anyone else.

**Paola Mardo:** This one went particularly viral.

[CLIP: ROCKY ROAD TO DUBLIN, SINNERS DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, PROXIMITY MEDIA 2025]

**Serena Göransson:** I mean, I hoped they would. It was an insane thing to create with the team. It was so sexy. It was, like, really hot. While the film is not technically a musical, production-wise, it very much is a musical.

[0:33 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today we're talking Sinners score and soundtrack. Serena Göransson is the Sinners executive music producer, meaning she helped put together the incredible sound and music of the film, working closely with her longtime creative and life partner, Ludwig Göransson, who is the film's composer and executive producer. He won his third Academy Award for this film.

Serena got her start as a violinist at a very young age. She went on to become a concert master and later, studio musician working on film scores. That's how she met Ludwig. Their musical partnership has spawned many award-winning scores and soundtracks. Some of them you may have heard of, including Oppenheimer, where she also played the violin, Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, Tenet, Black Panther, and so many more. As you can already tell, they're longtime collaborators of Ryan Coogler and Christopher Nolan, and their upcoming films include the film The Mandalorian and The Odyssey.

On this episode, Serena walks us through her process as executive music producer on Sinners, what it takes to bring together these legendary blues musicians and artists to create not only iconic music for the film but also these incredible scenes, including I Lied to You, the song performed by Miles Caton, or Sammie, in the iconic surreal or juke joint montage scene and the viral song Rocky Road to Dublin, portrayed by Jack O'Connell as Remmick. Here's my conversation with Serena Göransson.

[2:17 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Welcome to In Proximity, Serena Göransson!

**Serena Göransson:** Thank you.

**Paola Mardo:** Thank you for being here. I have so many questions about your work on the film Sinners. We're just going to go right into it. When you first got the script and read it, what got you excited?

**Serena Göransson:** Well, the stage was set when Ryan finally sent me the script because for, I don't know, years, he had been sending us these videos of himself playing the guitar, these blues songs, just sharing music. And so we had kind of an idea of where his head was. But then, when I finally got the script, I just connected with it on so many levels. It was so funny. It was so sexy.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah! Yes.

**Serena Göransson:** It was, like, really hot.

[LAUGHTER]

**Paola Mardo:** You're reminding me of when I first read it. I was like, "Wow, my boss wrote this." But, yeah, keep going. And any scenes in particular, musical moments that stuck with you.

**Serena Göransson:** I mean, obviously the surreal montage. Obviously. When I got to that scene, I was like shock and awe. I just—and I don't think anyone except Ryan could have written this—a scene like that. And the way it was all there on paper, you know, obviously it's something that's being talked about so much since the film came out, but I think what people don't necessarily know is that every single piece was in that script.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah.

**Serena Göransson:** It was in the scene that, you know, Pearlina's past and future spirits—the fact that each character had a past and future spirit with them, Pearlina's soul sister and then the other dancer who's with her, Delta Slim with the Senegalese, the griot playing djembe, and then the DJ, and Miles, like, with that akonting, ngoni player and the electric guitarist, the Funkadelic guitarist that kind of blows the whole thing open, it was all there. And I didn't know it was going to look the way it did, but I knew it was—I knew it was going to be big.

[CLIP: SURREAL MONTAGE, SINNERS DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, PROXIMITY MEDIA 2025]

**Paola Mardo:** What you did, specifically, was produced the music parts, right? So can you talk about, I don't know, those first meetings about the songs and how you guys were going to bring it to life onscreen.

**Serena Göransson:** While the film is not technically a musical, production-wise, it very much is a musical and needed to be handled as such, which really just came down to, like, the number of musical moments that needed to be individually accounted for. I remember being in this meeting and, and someone saying, "Well, you know, there are only five songs." And I had gone through the script and sort of started building this spreadsheet of what we really needed, and I remember saying, "Well, actually, you know, there are like 38 individual musical moments that we need to be—that we need to create and build and, and execute."

**Paola Mardo:** When you say "musical moments," because there's obviously the performances and the actual songs that people sing and perform, but what else was there?

**Serena Göransson:** There are all these songs that are built in, right? Like, Rocky Road to Dublin was in the script. The Surreal Montage song, obviously in the script; Sammie singing in the car with Stack, in the script. But there are so many other moments like the trio outside singing this—I think it was in the script as a "mountain song," and coming up to the juke and singing Pick Poor Robin, which was also in the script. And it's Pearline taking the stage, which ended up being Pale, Pale Moon, but in the script, it was just "Pearline takes the stage."

Meeting Delta Slim for the first time when he's playing harmonica, okay, what is he playing? Who are his references? You know, where is he coming from? He's the best musician in the Delta. You know, it was important to all of us but certainly to Ryan, Ludwig, and myself that each musician's world was really considered. And the conversations around that, the research that we did, the songs that they ended up performing, that was really part of each cast's process in developing their characters.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. So, on the page, five or six songs maybe, but, like, in reality, through the story, there are all these moments that required music that you guys had to create, essentially. What are the steps and what is your role, I guess, in that, as an executive music producer?

**Serena Göransson:** Well, I mean, if you'd asked me this before we started, I really wouldn't have known what to say. It's something that just naturally evolved as we saw what the needs were and, and figured out how to build the music world of, of Ryan's story in real time. We quickly realized that we—like, not only did we need to move to New Orleans, but our team needed to move, as well. I rented this beautiful studio called Esplanade Studios there that was a second home to us and to many of the cast members who would come whenever they weren't shooting something else. I found those moments with Ryan to get more context on what he was imagining so that we had kind of every possibility available to him.

When I came on, there was a budget already prepared that I, I realized was not quite right for what we needed to do, and I worked with the producers and with Warner Bros. to sort of go

through that line-by-line and make sure that everything was accounted for. Maintaining the budget while also getting what Ryan needed was a real balancing act. Both Ludwig and I and our team did so many things ourselves that I think, normally, would have been things that we hired people to come in for. But, in keeping the team tight, I think we were able to achieve so much more.

[9:20 - "In Proximity Theme Stinger" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Serena Göransson:** I found ethnomusicologists who shared our value system in their approach to this time, to this period, to these musicians, you know, identifying all of those moments and understanding, being really considerate of the context of each moment. Where is this character on their journey through, through the story? What kind of touchstones do we want to place here based on the research that we've done with all of these ethnomusicologists?

I worked with them almost every day. Just, there was so much to learn, and a lot of it was specific to scenes. Ingrid Monson, who just retired, but she was previously the Quincy Jones Chair of African American Studies at Harvard; Bruce Jackson, who was extremely helpful with the scene where the imprisoned workers who were singing the work song on the side of the road. Rhiannon Giddens was someone who, who connected with Ryan, I think when he was still writing.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. So Rhiannon Giddens is a Grammy award winning singer, instrumentalist, and composer. She's a MacArthur grant recipient and a Pulitzer Prize winner. She also played banjo on some songs in the film, including Old Corn Liquor.

**Serena Göransson:** You know, talking to her about the history of the banjo, about string band music, about other Black music traditions in the South, about Irish culture, she, she's just a wealth of knowledge. She's an extraordinary person. I mean, it was so much, talking to the studio every day, helping them to understand what we wanted our approach to be, and—but also what our pie-in-the-sky version of this movie was going to be, but also, "Here's a Plan B. Here's a Plan C. Here's a Plan D," you know, just in case what we really want to do doesn't work out.

I worked with the line producer and the producers making sure we had real musicians for trade in the film, and not just any musicians but musicians who had really dedicated their lives to, to the blues. So every musician you see in the film is actually playing their instrument and is recording the song.

Oftentimes, I'd be driving to set at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, and Chris Welcker and I would be on the phone the entire time talking about where we were going to put mics or how we were going to record the sound from the scene to ensure that it would be usable because there were so—there were so many songs. There was a whole movie that was—that took place in the juke from the time we arrive to the time that everything starts to fall apart.

**Paola Mardo:** Right, yeah, because music is constantly being played.

**Serena Göransson:** Music is constantly playing in the juke, so what's playing in the juke, and then there's score on top of those songs. And then there are people coming up to the juke and singing songs. And then there are songs outside of the juke while there's music still going on inside of the juke, and people are walking in and out. And so that doorway was, was an important piece because you're hearing something as you're walking up or every time—

**Paola Mardo:** That's so interesting.

**Serena Göransson:** When Cornbread leaves and Delta Slim takes over the post at the door, when the group of vampires at the end are singing Pick Poor Robin and Grace hears Bo through the window—there's so much there that needed to be accounted for. There were just so many ways that the music intersected with everything else, and there was no roadmap for that. So we were sort of figuring out how to do that in real-time. And I think at some point we realized that we were, production-wise, absolutely making a musical, but—

[13:38 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Working with Delroy Lindo, right? He plays a piano at the juke, but he's also playing a harmonica the first time we meet him as Delta Slim at the railroad station. Can you talk about that scene and how, how that came together and the musician you worked with, as well?

**Serena Göransson:** Yes. It was very important to me that these music scenes felt real and authentic and lived-in and not staged. From the beginning, I wanted to—I wanted to work with Delroy, who was one of the biggest blues legends, Bobby Rush, who maybe two years ago at the Grammys, Ludwig's dad was so starstruck when we ran into him. And we—I ended up kind of stalking him for the next couple years.

We didn't know when this—when we were going to be shooting this scene. It kept—it kept moving around, and then we found out one day, okay, we might be coming back in a couple months to shoot the scene. We're not sure. And, at like 7:00 p.m. that night, I got a text that we were shooting it tomorrow.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, my goodness! Okay.

**Serena Göransson:** And then I called Bobby, who was in Hawaii.

**Paola Mardo:** Because he's on tour.

**Serena Göransson:** He's on tour. It was his last night, and he was flying back the next day. And Bobby's in his 90s!

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah, wow.

**Serena Göransson:** And he came to set and, and he and Delroy went into a trailer for hours, talking about—

**Paola Mardo:** So you called him, 7:00 p.m., and all these artists, and then—that night. The next day, everyone shows up to set.

**Serena Göransson:** Everyone's on set.

**Paola Mardo:** Amazing. And then, as producer, you're kind of wrangling everybody, and Bobby and Delroy find themselves in a trailer working on that scene.

**Serena Göransson:** Yes. So the solo that we hear Delta Slim playing when we first meet him, from the beginning, Delroy wanted this to be very personal. And what happened was he shared a story that he's never told anyone else with Bobby that day in his trailer. We don't know what it was. And he asked him to interpret it through his harmonica. Bobby was—he's in the scene. He's hidden by, by actors who he's sitting in front of, and he's sitting directly across from Delroy. They've already talked. They know what they're doing. Bobby's playing. Delroy's kind of following, mimicking him, but Bobby's also watching Delroy. And there's an energy there that he's—there's a story there in his character that he's telling as well with his body, with his face, with his eyes that Bobby's playing off of. And so they—the two of them, they created this song in the moment, and Chris Welcker recorded it. It's a small moment, but there's so much—there's so much at play there that I think, even if you don't know who Bobby Rush is, even if you don't know anything about the blues, you know there's something there at play. And I hope that you feel that. But that was just—you know, that's one of many musical moments in the story.

[CLIP: MEET DELTA SLIM SCENE, SINNERS DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, PROXIMITY MEDIA 2025]

[DELTA SLIM PLAYING HARMONICA WITH GUITARIST]

**Stack Moore:** These two going to be playing down at the old sawmill. It's the grand opening of our new joint!

[17:08 - Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

**Paola Mardo:** Well, let's talk about Rocky Road to Dublin. This was, I would say, one of the—I mean, so much of the music people were talking about when the film came out. This one went particularly viral. Can I ask you what your reaction was when you started to see, like, people were making TikToks about the vampires dancing outside, people started doing the little Irish jig that Jack and all of them do? Like, when you saw those online, what did you—did you even think that people would be talking about that scene or that song?

**Serena Göransson:** I mean, I hoped they would. It was—it was insane. It was an insane thing to, to create with the team, with Ryan, and to then see—I mean, we were so thrilled with how it turned out, and Jack was—he was unbelievable that night. I mean, they all were—Mike singing Rocky Road on camera!

**Paola Mardo:** Yes, and singing it as a vampire, too. So can you talk about that? Because the song Rocky Road to Dublin is a pub song. It's an Irish pub song traditionally, but in the film, it's sung in a very different, almost spiritual, emotional way. Can you talk about that?

**Serena Göransson:** Yeah. So Ryan wrote this into the script. It—now it is sung as a pub song, usually, now. It's something that is sung in a pub. When it was first written, it was really a poem, actually, that someone took to England and performed. And this was obviously a time when you couldn't rent an apartment in England, necessarily, if you were Irish. So to have that juxtaposition with this very, like, violent song about a journey that someone takes and all that they encounter on the way.

**Paola Mardo:** But can you also talk about the style? Because I know it's this beautiful, kind of old-school, traditional way of Irish singing called sean-nós, I think, right?

**Serena Göransson:** Yes. Yes.

**Paola Mardo:** And can you talk about what that is and how you got Jack to sing it? Because it's so beautiful.

**Serena Göransson:** Yeah. He was so committed from the beginning, and we recorded that song so many times with him. He kept taking it to another level. Yeah, there's a style of singing called sean-nós, which you know. It's a centuries-old vocalist tradition. It's a solo vocal with maybe one other instrument, and it's very—it's highly melismatic, a lot of ornamentation, very, very intimate almost like you're singing to yourself. You know, we did a deep-dive on sean-nós singers in Ireland and found Iarla Ó Lionáird who we called up, and I was—I was sort of nervous to ask him about this because I was worried that it would feel, you know, somehow, like, disrespectful or sacrilegious to ask him if he thought it would be appropriate to sing Rocky Road to Dublin in this way. And he thought about it, and that night he recorded himself. It's so, so beautiful. We played it for Jack. Jack loved it, and he just internalized that—the rhythm and the free sort of wandering nature of that phrasing.

[CLIP: ROCKY ROAD TO DUBLIN, SINNERS DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, PROXIMITY MEDIA 2025]

**Serena Göransson:** We wanted it to feel as if Jack was reaching back through time for a memory. We wanted to bring an emotional aspect of it to his story. And Jack, I don't know if he's talked—I think he's talked about this, but he dedicated his performance to his late father, who was Irish, was from a very specific part of Ireland. A lot of the recordings are by people who

have Dublin accents. Beth McGuire, our dialect coach, really didn't want him to be singing this with a Dublin accent.

**Paola Mardo:** Why is that?

**Serena Göransson:** Because his father was from Munster. We found a musician who—in New—around New Orleans who came in, and he was Jack's dialect coach for the song. We wanted it to feel—to have an almost spiritual quality, and at the same time, we wanted it to reflect all of this new family he had surrounding him who he was singing this with. When you're turned, you have access to memories. But do you have access to, you know, the exact way, the pronunciation? Like, do you sound like a native speaker? Is Jack supposed to sound like a native speaker when he speaks in Grace's language? Is—are these vampires singing with the same Irish accent as, as Jack? There are all these details that you have to make a decision on as you're creating these—as you're creating music, as you're working on the arrangement, as you're building out the scenes.

**Paola Mardo:** Right. So what did you guys get to?

**Serena Göransson:** So we—and I think this makes sense. We, we sort of—we decided that—or Ryan decided that you had access to memories and to music, but you're still in your body. You know the song because you have access to the memory, but you're limited by your own body, by your own physicality.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Serena Göransson:** These—all of his new friends were outside. They've never heard this music in their life, but they all grew up singing in church. So we recorded this—we recorded a big group of, of singers in New Orleans who were mostly Irish, and then we recorded with this group in L.A. called the DC6 Singers Collective. They showed up singing the song like they'd sung it their whole lives. It was—it was nuts. They came in and just the first take.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Serena Göransson:** They were—they were going so hard. And it really is an Irish rap. It's not an easy song to sing. It was a very exciting moment where I—an element that we had been kind of searching for during production and in post just fell into place.

[CLIP: ROCKY ROAD TO DUBLIN, SINNERS DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, PROXIMITY MEDIA 2025]

**Serena Göransson:** And then we also knew that we wanted the vampires outside to be playing instruments as Jack is dancing, as he's singing. And then we realized that a lot of the instruments that would have been played in a traditional Irish song and setting were the same instruments that you would've heard in the juke.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Serena Göransson:** So knowing that eventually, we'll need these instruments outside, we sort of placed those same instruments in the juke, so guitar—

**Paola Mardo:** Is it, like, the banjo—oh, yeah, go ahead.

**Serena Göransson:** Yeah, banjo, guitar, harmonica, jaw harp, tin whistle, hand drum or the bodhrán in Irish music. It's an interesting parallel, right?

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah, yeah.

[25:22 - Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

**Paola Mardo:** Well, thank you for sharing that and sharing just the incredible work that went into, I mean, all of these songs and this one in particular. You mentioned you have some Irish heritage. But you're also Korean, as well. Can you talk a little bit about, I don't know, what it was like to connect to this film as a musician but also having sort of some connections to the people in the movie, as well?

**Serena Göransson:** You know, growing up, my grandmother, my Korean grandmother—you know, she speaks fluent Japanese—she remembers this—the time of being occupied, of not—of being, you know, severely punished if you were caught speaking Korean. My dad's side is Irish American, and he's always been very, you know, proud of the fact that he's Irish in a way that many Americans are proud of their European heritage. Maybe five years ago, I took my parents to Ireland, this trip to see if we could find out where exactly his family was from.

You hear about the Famine, and you hear about how poor the country was, you know, which is what led to some of the people coming here. We didn't learn in school that this was an intentional starvation, that there were plantations in Ireland, that you couldn't own land unless you were loyal to the Crown. Learning all of that and learning about the musical parallels between these two cultures, it was something that I wanted to highlight and bring as much, you know, empathy to, to this musical moment for Jack as, as I could.

[27:11 - In Prox Theme Stinger by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** You have a surprise Voice Memo that I would love to play for you.

**Serena Göransson:** Aww!

**Paola Mardo:** And have you respond to, so here we go, someone with a question who you know.

[CLIP: SURPRISE VOICE MEMO]

**Hailee Steinfeld:** Hello, Queen Serena. It's Hailee. I have about a million questions I could ask you, but I am curious about this: you have such a calm strength and fierce confidence in your work and in your presence. When you are deep in a project, how do you know when it's finished or when to keep digging?

[LAUGHTER]

**Paola Mardo:** I thought it was so perfect to end with this. So, for the listeners who aren't watching on video right now, that was the wonderful Hailee Steinfeld. She portrayed the character of Mary in the film *Sinners*, and she also worked with you guys on a song called *Dangerous*. But, yeah, Serena, what would your response be to Hailee's question?

**Serena Göransson:** I don't think it's ever done. I mean, we're still learning things about this time, and maybe the thing that I cherish most about my work relationship with Ludwig, and with Ryan and Zinzi, it's never—the music story can never be too deep. It can never be too specific or too thoughtful, too intentional. And that's really the part of this that I love the most.

In many ways, it feels like we're still making this movie. You know, it's been surreal to see the response both when the film came out but also moving through this season where it's being recognized. And I'm just so thrilled for Autumn, for Ruth, for Hannah. I mean, we were all in this together. I mean, obviously Ryan, Zinzi, Sev, and Chris Welcker, you know, Felipe Pacheco, everyone, but we were really the boots on the ground. We were—it really was blood, sweat, and tears. Nothing about this was easy. For us, it didn't feel like there was a clear path forward. We all felt so, so deeply that this needed to be done with, with such care and intention. Ryan's passion and, and this story being so personal to him, to him and to Zinzi, that that extended to everyone. I'm just so honored that I was able to be a part of this story.

[30:01 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Now we've come to the Prox Recs segment of our show, where we ask our guests to recommend something. It could be a book, movie, podcast, really anything that helps you in your craft or what you do. So, Serena, what would be your Prox Rec?

**Serena Göransson:** My Prox Rex, it has to be this book called *Blacksound* by Matthew Morrison, who's a professor at Stanford. Everyone should read this book. It helped me to understand more about the history of, of this music. I love that he uses the term "Blacksound" because I think when we think of music, we're thinking of notes and melodies and, and things that could be written down, concepts that can be written down. And it just helped me to understand it with more depth. He's someone who I would love to meet someday.

One of my favorite passages of this book is the fact that we like to think that songs we hear, that commercial songs we hear are somehow neutral, and we forget that they are written, recorded,

produced by musicians and, you know, these constellations of producers and labels and teams, by people who are—who are obviously, you know, racialized in the way that we all are. These sounds didn't just come. They weren't pulled out of thin air. There is a lineage there that, that I think we all need to be more aware of. It's something that I've read and reread. I just wish that I'd read it earlier.

**Paola Mardo:** Well, thank you for sharing and if—Matthew?

**Serena Göransson:** Matthew Morrison.

**Paola Mardo:** If he's listening, Serena wants to meet! So shout out. Thank you, Serena Göransson, for being on In Proximity.

**Serena Göransson:** Thank you.

**Paola Mardo:** I learned so much from you today.

**Serena Göransson:** Thank you so much.

[32:21 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music is by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza.

The production team includes Celine Mendiola and Alexandria Santana.

For transcripts and more information, head to [proximitymedia.com](https://proximitymedia.com).

[VOICEOVER ENDS]