

WAKANDA FOREVER: THE OFFICIAL BLACK PANTHER PODCAST
“Chapter 4: Dominique Thorne, Ruth E. Carter, Ludwig Göransson”
Final Transcript

[VOICEOVER]

[Kill The Scientist from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Every film is a machine, a complex device made of people with a myriad of jobs and responsibilities. That complexity tends to increase with the budget. And it increases even more for films like Wakanda Forever, which not only clocks in at the upper range of film budgets but attempts to say something. You don't just trip into a film like this. It has to be built, and that process starts even before the film is conceived.

For Wakanda Forever to be built, the right people had to be in the right place.

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[Drinking the Herb from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

And I guess that's what this podcast is all about — meeting all the people and hearing about all the places they occupied to make this work.

So today we'll meet three more of them: actor Dominique Thorne who plays Riri Williams, costume designer Ruth E. Carter, and composer Ludwig Göransson. Much like a few Marvel superheroes we know, we'll break apart the machinery of this movie and get a good look into its hardware, zooming into our guests' creative processes in the hopes of learning more about the craft of filmmaking and how artisans like Dominique, Ruth, and Ludwig helped make us feel something as we watched a story unfold onscreen.

This is Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast. I'm Ta-Nehisi Coates.

[Glory to Bast from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

There's this commercial my wife loves.

[Hiding In The Bathroom from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

In it, Dominique Thorne encourages a young black girl and burgeoning inventor to continue in her craft. The power of the commercial lay in the persona Dominique is occupying: the prodigy Ri-Ri Williams, aka Ironheart. Created by Brian Michael Bendis and fleshed out by friend of the show, Eve L. Ewing, Ironheart is a different kind of hero. Now “genius” is a pretty standard comic book archetype. Genius in the form of a young black woman from the South Side of Chicago is not.

[MUSIC STOPS]

My wife is from Chicago, and when she was a child, commercials like this did not exist. We don't need to overstate things. Advertisements won't save the world. But they are a dominant portion of the American aesthetic and have long been a means for propagating some of the worst ideas in our history.

[Original Music from Pat Mesiti-Miller]

I talked to Dominique about how it felt to embody one of the better ideas – the notion that genius does not emanate from its packaging.

Wakanda Forever is Dominique's third feature film – following roles on *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Judas and the Black Messiah*. You could say she's somewhat of an acting genius herself. But as the daughter of Trinidadian parents raised in Brooklyn, New York, her path to acting wasn't always guaranteed. In fact, there was plenty of doubt and even rejection including that one time she auditioned for the role of another genius from the world of *Wakanda*.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: So, in 2018, when the first *Black Panther* came out, where were you in your life?

Dominique Thorne: Hmm, when the first one came out, where was I in my life? Man, I was accepting the fact that I didn't get the role in, like, a real way, though, because...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Let me back up a little bit. What did you audition for?

Dominique Thorne: I auditioned for *Shuri* in, like, what, 2016, 2017, and that was the first time I met Ryan, first time I met all the *Marvel* folks for real. And I knew before I left that I didn't get the audition, like I didn't get the role.

I was at Cornell at the time, and I had also signed with these agents. It was the only agency that had wanted to meet with me that respected the fact that I wanted to go to school. And, at that point in my life, I was not where I needed to be to take on a film like that.

And a big part of that was the relationships that I had with my family at the time as I tried to figure out and balance, like, this insane academic warzone that I was in and just sort of that up against all of these ambitions that I had of, like, this life that I wanted to live that was so different from anything that I was seeing around me.

So, fast-forward, I didn't get the role, and I was not upset.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You wasn't hating? You wasn't like, "I ain't going to see that"?

Dominique Thorne: Nah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: "I ain't watching no *Black Panther*!"

Dominique Thorne: No, to be honest...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: "They slept on me! Coogler slept on me!"

Dominique Thorne: I'm screaming. No, no, to be honest, I knew I had things to deal with. So, 2018, by the time the movie came out, I was in a much better place. I also, just logistically, I hadn't done any film. So, from the Marvel side, they were like, you know, "Get your credits up, and then we'd love to work with you." And so, by 2018, I had done my first film.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Which was Beale Street, right?

Dominique Thorne: Yeah, correct. Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It was Beale Street. Okay.

Dominique Thorne: Yeah. I was just in a much more grounded, centered place. And so it felt like even more of, like, a blessing when you do get that call, and it's like, "Oh, nah, like, we meant what we said. Like, we want to do this for real," you know?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And who called you? Was it Ryan or Nate for Ironheart?

Dominique Thorne: It was Nate. It was Nate Moore, who I also met during that first audition process. And he was like, "Yeah, I don't know if you remember me." I'm like, "Sir..."

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Sir, sir.

Dominique Thorne: "Yes, I remember you. Dude." Yeah. Yeah, yeah, that was a beautiful call. That was a beautiful call, and I...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: What'd he say?

Dominique Thorne: He asked me first if I was familiar with the character Ironheart, and I was like, "Yeah, absolutely." I was... I remember being in my room at Cornell when I saw, like, the graphic drop. Like, I think it was going viral at the time. It was, like, this Black girl with this huge afro and the helmet.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Dominique Thorne: So, when he asked me if I knew about the character, I was like, "Oh, yeah, of course I do." And he was saying that they're looking to tell her story next and they want to know if I would be interested in playing her.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Wow.

Dominique Thorne: Still silent at this point on the phone because I'm waiting for him to tell me, like, "I'll send you the audition material," like, "You can get us your tape by this date. Like, we look forward to seeing your audition." I'm waiting for him to give me those details, and it was just silent. And then he was like, "Hello?" He was like, "Yeah, like, would you be interested?" I was like, "Yes. Absolutely."

And then he says that they would like to introduce her in Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. And then, man...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Jesus.

Dominique Thorne: ... what do you say at that point? Like, what words do you have at that point?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Did you read a bunch of comic books in that week? Like, what'd you do?

Dominique Thorne: Oh, yeah. What? What?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It's interesting, like, in the -- you know, and I had to know all of this at one point in my life, when I was, like, writing Black Panther. We had to be up on all the little things that was going on over here because everything's connected and all of that. But in the comic book, Riri emerges, actually -- so I guess it is quite similar -- in this moment after Tony Stark has passed away.

I wonder, in your prep for the role, like, did you... did you read Iron Man? Did you study Downey's performance as Iron Man? Because, interestingly enough, he is a character, also, that's kind of masking some vulnerabilities with this humor, obviously in a very, very different way than Riri does. I just wondered, did you see connections, or -- or was it an organic process that you kind of had to do on your own. What was that for you?

Dominique Thorne: It was definitely a process and journey that I tried to go on on my own because, number one, Robert Downey's performance as and of Tony Stark is prolific, you know? And it'll always be...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, it's iconic. Right.

Dominique Thorne: Yeah. I mean, this all started, the MCU started with Iron Man 1, and I was very much aware of that. Iron Man 1 -- my baby brother was born, like, a couple months before the release of that movie. And so that is how Marvel became, like, a family affair because we all went to go see it when he was born. And all of that started because of Tony Stark, you know? So I already had, like, a very deep understanding of Tony Stark.

But I think one of the things that makes Riri so beautiful just to receive and to witness and to acknowledge is the fact that she is critically different from this man. She is not coming into this with the wealth of resources that Tony Stark is, and that plays a big part. She's not coming into this from a background that resembles what that sort of upbringing or access looks like. It's, in a lot of ways, I think, the polar opposite. But then they are sort of united with this rare genius and this rare strain of ambition that puts them into the same category in terms of taking on the task of building this iron thing.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Mm-hmm. You know what's interesting -- I, I never put it together, but I'm just thinking about it as you talk. So Riri is an interesting character because, you know, she comes from... God, I'm just going to say it. She... you know, she comes from the hood, right?

Dominique Thorne: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: So she's from the hood, and then she's at MIT.

Dominique Thorne: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And I know you didn't go to MIT, but it must be some similarity. I mean, you went to an Ivy League school, so you're coming out the hood, and you're going to Cornell. So I... did you pull on any of that?

Dominique Thorne: Absolutely, absolutely. And I -- I think that's what made me the most excited, too, because it's like, I feel like I haven't seen that, you know?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Dominique Thorne: Because so much of who Riri is and how she comes to be is centered around her experience as a young Black female from the South Side of Chicago, I wanted to, as much as it was appropriate, sort of lean into the experiences where I've been the young Black female from Brooklyn entering into whatever white space or entering into whatever space would not expect to have me there. This is a part of the reason why I struggled at Cornell.

I feel like Riri feels very similarly in the sense that she knows where she comes from and understands that MIT, like, by comparison, is, like, a luxury. It's a vacation, essentially, and because of this genius that she has and the ease with which excelling comes for her, it's also a cakewalk. So now it becomes about: how can I leverage this time that I'm here for my best interest?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Mm-hmm.

Dominique Thorne: Like, a lot of people go to these schools, and they think about, or they fall in line with the awe that comes from their -- their reputation and their history, but she's here like, "Y'all are lucky to have me. Now what can you do for me?" you know?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right, right. And how did you get to that? How did you get to that, like, sort of freedom that, you know, clearly your character has because she's a genius?

Dominique Thorne: I think it comes from how she occupies her time, honestly. Like, one of the main things that Ryan was talking about at the time is that he sees her as a gearhead, and I think that falls in line with the car that she drives, when you see the suit that she made with her own two hands. Getting to really tap into that sort of tactile part of who she is, I think really opened my eyes, and also, to be honest, wearing the suit for real because the make of the suits have changed from Black Panther to the show, and that first suit in Black Panther is all practical.

So I'm really wearing that, and it does something else.

[Riri's Garage from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

It, like -- it gives a level of information that you can't get any other way, I think, from seeing, like, "Ah, so she's out here hustling these kids for their money and using it to pour back into the suit, pour back into the car." And now you're wearing the suit, and you're like, "Oh, I understand," you know? "Okay, I get it."

[MUSIC STOPS]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Wow, so they really put you in that suit? That's a real... that really...

Dominique Thorne: They really put me in that suit. Oh, they really put me in that suit.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: How long it'd take to get in?

Dominique Thorne: I think -- because, you know, it's always go, go, go. I think we had gotten the time down to like 15, 20 minutes.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Wow. Wow. Wow, wow.

Dominique Thorne: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, man.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And like, when you're -- I've never had the opportunity to ask anybody this in a superhero movie or a comic book movie. When you're in one of these suits, do you feel it? Like, you -- can -- do you actually feel like a superhero?

Dominique Thorne: Man, man. I think definitely feel like a little bit of a badass, like, "Oh, shit, okay. I did this? All right." Because I think that's something that makes Riri a little bit more fun, too, is, like, she's not trying to be a superhero, you know? But she is just like that. Like naturally, that is who she is. Like, these situations, for lack of a better word, are coming into her life because of what her output naturally attracts.

So trying to, like, sort of reckon with that or understand that, I think the closest that I -- someone who is not a real-life genius -- will get to that is by being in the suit and at least...

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

... let me at least see what it's like to shoulder that, that weight, you know, to carry that weight alone, far more the weight of having to -- having people's lives on your hands because of something that you did, you know, something that your mind led you to.

[On The Beach from Black Panther Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[Original Music from Pat Mesiti-Miller]

[VOICEOVER]

Do the Right Thing. Malcolm X.

I'm Gonna Git You Sucka. The Five Heartbeats.

Amistad. Yellowstone. The Seinfeld pilot.

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

This is a tiny snapshot from Ruth E. Carter's illustrious career spanning over three decades. A Hollywood legend in her own right, she won the Oscar for Best Costume Design for Black Panther in 2018. She is the first African American and first Black woman to win the award. And whereas she had no mentors who looked like her when she entered the trade, Ruth now is a mentor for a growing crop of young Black costume designers.

[Original Music from Pat Mesiti-Miller]

When I talked to her for this podcast, I learned that not only does Ruth's process involve a lot of research and design, it is also informed by her lived experience. She grew up in a household with a sewing machine and a brother who was a fine artist. She spent her days with an activist family that lived across the street, inspiring her to really learn about Black history and the broader diaspora. She attended Hampton University, an HBCU where she found her people in theater and discovered her love of costume design.

Her first big break came from a phone call from none other than Spike Lee about a film called School Daze. He would later become her mentor and frequent collaborator. But back then, he was just Spike, an up-and-coming young director.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ruth E. Carter: One morning he called me, and he said, "This is the man of your dreams." And I was like, "Denzel, is that you?" And he was like, "No, this is Spike, and I want you to do School Daze." And, like, let's just say that was, like, a -- in January. And he sent me the script, and I started right away breaking down that script.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Were you, like, pulled in by the script? Is that what happened? Like, did you -- I'm trying to talk about, like, the imaginative process. Like, did you start thinking -- did the gears start turning as soon as you got in?

Ruth E. Carter: Yeah, because I had already been doing a lot of theater stuff. And so I knew that I could express myself creatively through the written word, through character, through character arcs, and I could create an arc for a character and, like, create their background and stuff. And so, from studying the Langston Hughes and the Lorraine Hansberry and all of the visuals that I pretty much saw in my mind going through school, I was ready for it.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: So all of that happens, right? So you --

Ruth E. Carter: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: As a child, you're exposed to the diaspora. You got the conscious family across the street. You go to an HBCU. You move into costume design, and, you know, you're out in L.A. You're working with Black filmmakers. And with all of that in mind and with all of that

context, I wonder what it was like to walk on to the set and to work on the first Black Panther film?

Ruth E. Carter: Yeah, it was definitely very much like starting Malcolm X, knowing that you were doing a film that was going to be very important to the culture, very important to you. It was going to bring to the surface a lot of things that we knew about our community, we knew about our -- the African diaspora, and we wanted to get the story right. And that's the same sentiment from Malcolm X to Black Panther 1, that there was a lot of mystery around the African diaspora. There's a lot of, you know, misnomers around about Malcolm X and his life.

And so Black Panther was, to me, an extension of that consciousness from Malcolm X to Black Panther of continuing the legacy of that type of filmmaking. You know, when I think of, you know, Spike being so forward in his ideas about what he wanted to see, what he wasn't seeing and what he wanted to see, and he made that very clear to all of us.

Ryan, very different filmmaker but same cloth, if you would --

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I can see it.

Ruth E. Carter: -- of wanting to be conscious and also honest and true to the culture. So it was exciting for me to know that I could open up the tribes and start delving into the details of the tribes and bringing some of that aspect into the costume design.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's a great comparison. You know, I think, like, one of the things that's interesting is we're here to talk about Black Panther and Wakanda Forever. But if Spike never pulls you aside, we're missing an essential piece, you know what I mean? And Lord knows what Spike did for Ryan or for whoever, you know what I mean? I'm sure I could trace the lines on that, too. But this is -- this is the direct one.

And, you know, one of the beautiful things about being a Black artist or being a Black writer is you do these things, and you put them out in the world, and you don't know what the impact is actually going to be, but you can touch somebody. And the thing might not be made manifest until -- I mean, how many years is it between Malcolm X and, you know, Black Panther? You know, almost 30 years.

Ruth E. Carter: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You know, to move to Wakanda Forever, which was very, very different, what was it like to come back to this project and know Chadwick Boseman being involved and knowing the kind of weight of the project, the different kind of weight of the project versus Black Panther?

Ruth E. Carter: It gave me the same butterflies as the first one. When I came on, it was very much Chadwick's film. And the return to Wakanda, it was very clear that we weren't just going to do the same thing. We were going to keep the same elements, but we wanted to elevate the aesthetic. There was also a big part of Wakanda that we were going to see that we hadn't developed, the Navy, you know, the Wakandan Navy. And there was this element of water. So, for a costume designer, a lot of things just came, you know, at me.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, how does that affect clothing and how clothing moves and everything?

Ruth E. Carter: You're right. We had to rethink everything for the Wakandans, the battles. And Wakanda had to actually be made so that they could get wet, and they were originally not made that way. You know, we made them with raffia and leather, which does not stand in the water. So there was a lot of thought process about how -- when M'Baku jumps into the water, how -- how is that going to -- how is he going to swim in that costume?

There was a big mountain to climb, I think bigger than the first one. We were all very focused but also very intense. I think there was an intensity to the air of, "What are we doing? You know, what do the Talokanils look like? What does this world look like? What does Namor look like?" You know, going back to the comics and looking at it, and then you are working with Marvel and their team of illustrators, and they're producing work that you want to understand how it fits within the whole world. And there's no real story to follow yet. It's still actually being put together. So you're just world-building at this point, you know?

And then we lost Chad, a very shock --

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Ruth E. Carter: Very shocking moment.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right. Right, right.

Ruth E. Carter: Heartbreaking.

[Music from Pat Mesiti-Miller]

Ruth E. Carter: Like, the whole world stood still, and you don't even understand what to do next, how to even absorb any information. It just becomes numbing. And we waited for Ryan to say whether we are going to do the movie or not.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right, right.

Ruth E. Carter: And that took some time. So there was a long pause. And then, when we came back and we decided to move forward with the art, we kept illustrating as Ryan was thinking through his grief, and we were all using this medium to be a source of comfort.

[On The Beach from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I want to go back to what you said before, which is that now you're bringing in a whole other culture. And I'm sure you have seen folks get Black culture or Black diasporic culture wrong many, many, many times. And I know just from talking to Hannah that she was very, very conscious of that and not wanting to, you know, be sloppy about this.

[MUSIC STOPS]

How did you make that turn here dealing with something that was not Black culture?

Ruth E. Carter: Well, we did develop another roadmap, you know, our own set of files and research on Mesoamerica. And the moment, the second, the minute that we were connected with a historian, we started showing them all the stuff we had, everything that we had to just get the first layer sorted out because I know through Black culture and things that you see in paintings can sometimes be manipulated so that it shows a one side -- a one-sided view of things. And they actually eliminated quite a lot of the images that we had.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Did they really? Wow.

Ruth E. Carter: Oh, yeah. They were like, "This is Aztec. It's not Mayan. This is paintings that were done by the Spaniards that wanted to show the Mayans were inferior. This is a cornfield that would not have existed."

Ta-Nehisi Coates: So you guys had to humble yourself a little bit.

Ruth E. Carter: Oh yeah, no doubt about it. I mean, they were very much generous and forthcoming with research that we could delve into. We looked at the Jaina figures, which are these little figurines that the Mayans made, and it showed you so many beautiful costumes, and the Dresden Codex, and there were all of these places where we could find our information. And they were extremely helpful in that -- in that way.

[Chak from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

And then there was this interpretation that they allowed us freedom with, which was the Talokanil. How can we bring this anchor of what was true about the Mayan culture? We had this little part in the film that was historic, and how do we immerse it into this underworld, this fictitious world, and bring, like, Afrofuture to Mesoamerica, and so -- in the same way that we approached Wakanda.

You have Namor, and we are examining the illustrations, and we definitely want him to be rooted in Mayan culture. So his neckpiece, which has the two-headed feathered serpent on the neckpiece, and you can go to Chichen Itza and see the Kukulcan Pyramid, and it has the feathered serpent going down the staircase on both sides. And it's very important that we connect the history to this man or this comic book character who is one of the first comic book characters, the first superheroes of Marvel's history. And it is also connected to this deep history of Mayan culture.

So it's, like, beautiful connection. And the two-headed serpents, they're open-mouthed, and in the middle is a large pearl, which represents the water. I remember we did the double pearl necklace. We saw that in the illustrations, and Ryan grappled a little bit with whether or not it should have the pearls or not have the pearls.

[MUSIC STOPS]

We decided that it should, and I think it was a beautiful addition to that -- to that necklace. And it goes on. I mean, it goes on.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's really interesting because Angela's coming back as Ramonda, but this time Queen Ramonda. It's a very different thing. And it's interesting because we see her, also -- I mean, I think we see more of her, definitely in different scenarios. You know, we get her at the funeral. We get her at the UN, you know, before, in this kind of official capacity. And we get her, you know, in a -- in a more informal capacity without the headdress and everything. You know what I want to know? Like, how did you think about -- because as much as Shuri, she's bearing this grief, and I wonder how that came out in the costuming.

Ruth E. Carter: You know, the issue of grief, it was examined with the funeral being white and -- that it being a celebration of life. But with Shuri's character, I remember Ryan saying, you know, "We don't really want to focus on, like, fashion. We want to dial it back and keep it simple and let the story and the emotion be in the foreground. I agreed with that.

And so you'll see Shuri in the lab in gray, a gray knit, a very simple gray costume. She opens the film in gray plaid. She lays on the table to take the potion from the heart-shaped herb that they make in a gray tunic and pant. And we wanted it to just subside, her clothes to kind of subside, but I still had to bring it up to Wakanda's standards and make it interesting for her because she's the genius but not focus so much on it until we got through the story a little bit.

With Angela, opening at the UN is a totally different energy to how she opened Black Panther 1. She did have her crown and her shoulder mantle in BP1. It was a softer color. She was -- she was, you know, in a traditional look ready for the king's ascension challenge at the Warrior Falls. So, this time, she is the ruler of Wakanda, and I felt like -- I had done five movies with Angela, and her arms have always been unforgettable. And Ryan really wanted her to make a big statement in this scene. And I believe this costume that she has on in the UN was actually designed for another scene in my mind, and he selected that for the UN.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Do you remember which scene it was designed for?

Ruth E. Carter: Actually, the scene where she comes face-to-face with Namor in the palace.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Okay.

Ruth E. Carter: And so it really did work beautifully for the UN because I felt like the show of strength in her arms was very clear, vulnerability as a woman, beauty as a woman. The gray crown, you know, and the gold collar all, like, gave her a look of being in power --

[Outreach Center from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

-- and the strength of Wakanda with its vibranium and the strength of Africa with its Gold Coast. And, you know, it said all those things to me, yeah, moving forward.

[MUSIC SWELLS THEN FADES OUT]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Ruth, I -- you know, I kind of said this in the beginning, but, you know, you really made it clear throughout the interview, like, you're a person that really connects us to the tradition, and you really made that clear in the Malcolm X piece of this, you know what I mean? Like, I really can see the strong lines between Spike and Ryan. And obviously, you know, you're here to talk about costuming and that sort of thing. But for me personally, I just really, really appreciate you doing this.

One of the things that's become clear throughout this is you can't do any of this alone. That's, you know, spanning generations. That's through generations. That's -- you know what I mean? You kind of need those sorts of connections. We have to do things together. So, you know, I thank you, you know, for doing this together with me.

Ruth E. Carter: Thank you, Ta-Nehisi. It's always a pleasure. I could talk to you forever. I appreciate being a part of this.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Awesome.

[On the Beach from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[AUDIO CLIP]

Ryan Coogler: So it's 4:51 in the morning. I'm in my hotel. I still haven't been to sleep yet. Incredible day. We flew in, landed at like 10:00, 10:00 a.m. in Lagos, and me and Ludwig was, like, greeted by folks that are handling us. My first time in West Africa -- you know, genetically, my -- my ancestors are from here. I found that out after taking the African ancestry test that ironically Chadwick made me -- made me get. He's the one who put me and Zinzi on it.

But, you know, a lot of my ancestry is Yoruba, which is, you know -- it means my ancestors was running around somewhere close to here a few hundred years ago. So it's crazy to just be back, touched down here, and emotionally exhilarating. So, you know, signing off, we'll see what -- we'll see what -- we'll see -- I guess we should call it today because it's 5:00 in the morning. But we'll see what today brings. All right.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

[VOICEOVER]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That was Ryan Coogler in a voice memo recorded back in the spring of 2021, when he and composer Ludwig Göransson were in Lagos, Nigeria to work on the score for Wakanda Forever.

[I'm In A Cave from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Like Ruth and production designer Hannah Beachler, Ludwig won an Academy Award for his work on Black Panther. He has scored other films and television shows including Creed, The Mandalorian, and Tenet. He is also a Grammy-winning music producer perhaps best known for his work with the rapper Childish Gambino.

Ludwig and Ryan went to film school together and have partnered on almost all of Ryan's films. I think that means something beyond a taste for familiarity.

Using a similar playbook they developed for Black Panther, Ludwig and Ryan traveled straight to the source to create the score for Wakanda Forever. They worked with musicians in Lagos and London to expand the sound world of Wakanda. But one of the greatest challenges of this movie was to create the sound of a whole new civilization – Talokan.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You know, you said something just earlier about making music for film, and I just -- I'm going to presume that, like, our lay audience -- I know I certainly don't -- doesn't understand what that quite -- like, what all goes into that. So let me ask the most basic question. When are you brought into the process? When is the point that you start working? Is there a script sent to you, and you have to start thinking from there, or what happens?

Ludwig Göransson: Yeah, with Ryan, he gets me involved very early. So he sent me the script. I get to read his first version of the script, and then we have creative conversations about the music, what he's imagining, what I'm imagining. And then --

Ta-Nehisi Coates: What were you imagining for Wakanda Forever?

Ludwig Göransson: The first version of the script that I read was the first version that he wrote.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right, which is before Chad passed, right?

Ludwig Göransson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Okay.

Ludwig Göransson: So, I kind of had -- you know, we'd done the first one. We do know what the theme is for the main character of the movie, T'Challa, the Panther. Now, the new thing in this movie's obviously the Mayan, the Talokan and Namor. And we had a long conversation about that and he put me in touch with Dr. Gerardo. He was the kind of consultant in Mayan history. We talked a little bit about instruments and how little we know of that music because it's all gone.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Mm. Mm.

Ludwig Göransson: And then my thought process was that -- I talked to Ryan, like, we should at least go and try to get as close as we can to whatever that sound was.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And did you do that?

Ludwig Göransson: Uh-huh.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And can you talk about the trip?

Ludwig Göransson: I went to Mexico City, and I was connected with Camilo Lara, who's a great producer, and he has a great music studio there. He booked me some sessions with some incredible musicians, also some musicologists and archaeologists.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I'm sorry, but you booked the sessions. Do you know what you're playing yet?

Ludwig Göransson: No. I was asking for people that specialize in studying Mayan music.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And when you book the sessions, are you booking the sessions -- are these jam sessions, basically, essentially?

Ludwig Göransson: Yeah, yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Okay, I understand. I understand. So it's not like you're booking musicians to play a certain thing.

Ludwig Göransson: No.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You're booking them to help get this figured out, actually.

Ludwig Göransson: Yes, yes, people that know what instruments to use.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: What was that like?

Ludwig Göransson: It was incredible. I don't know anything about this kind of music and, you know, nothing was notated, and nothing is kept from that time. Everything was erased from history.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Like, what are they pulling from, themselves? What are they pulling from?

[I'm In A Cave from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[Yucatan from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[On The Beach from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Ludwig Göransson: Our musical archaeologists and musicologists, they've been looking at codex. They've been seeing some of the paintings. They've been going through tombs. In some tombs, they found instruments. Some of the people were buried with their instruments. So they found ocarinas and flutes, and they go in and look at the flute, and they can look at the keyholes of the flute, which intervals that was used the most.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Wow, wow.

Ludwig Göransson: So you can say, like, okay, well, these two intervals was played the most. So you know we have a, a hum of maybe what the sound was like. A lot of the instruments were, like, seashells and, like, turtle shells that you were hitting like drums. And you could see paintings of five people playing turtle shells in a formation. And there's also a flute called the God of Truth, where it creates such a high-pitched sound --

[Namor's House from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

-- it's, like, it's almost like torture. So you play this next to someone, and you torture them to tell the truth.

Yeah, so that was like -- you know, listening to all these sounds and, you know, all these instruments that I never fully heard before and definitely not in a movie because we didn't really know how it sounded, how the music sounded. So we can kind of also use it and make it up a little bit, you know?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: When does something that you start to feel begin to cohere and feel for the movie, when does that happen?

[Chak from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Ludwig Göransson: Man, a lot of times, I'm like, okay, this is really cool, but, like, I have no idea how this is going to work in the movie.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right, right. Right, right, right.

Ludwig Göransson: But there was a couple of times, especially, like, when we started playing the seashell. There was a couple of times where it's like, kind of like eureka moments, like, okay, well, this is definitely something special here.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Do you remember one in particular?

Ludwig Göransson: The one thing that I was like, okay, this is incredible is from -- you see that little -- it's called a death whistle. It's like a jaguar's mouth. It's a piece of ceramic. It's kind of -- it's beautiful, but it makes this really cool sound, almost like an animal or something.

[LUDWIG GÖRANSSON PLAYS DEATH WHISTLE]

[Chak from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Ludwig Göransson: Almost like a scream or, you know, like an animal scream or like something very primal.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Ludwig Göransson: That's kind of used all -- all over in the movie as like, part of Namor's sound world.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Got it. And so you heard that in the studio, and you were like, "That -- that's going in."

Ludwig Göransson: Ryan also was very adamant that, like, it would be great if we could get an artist to work with me or some musicians or artists that could also sing and rap in Mayan.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Wow.

Ludwig Göransson: We ended up finding a rap community on Instagram, and his name was Pat Boy, and they lived close to -- like between Mérida and Tulum. So we flew out to Mérida and had Pat Boy and his rap community come by a house there that we rented, and we recorded a song together. And he was telling me about, like, "I'm basically the first Mayan rapper."

[Laayli' kuxa'ano'one from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Soundtrack by ADN Maya Colectivo, Pat Boy, Yaalen K'uj, All Mayan]

Túuxta'abten le ajaw k'uj'o'ob
Ti'al u si'ob ten le tuukul
Ti'al in bisik ti'al in láak'o'ob
U yilo'ob buka'aj utsil
U yaabilta'al láak',
Ak k'i'ik'el yéetel ak lu'umila'

Síijen tu yáanal k'áax
Tu'ux kuxa'anen
Ta winknal
Chéen ka wu'uyiken
Mix táan a machiken
Yóok'ol kin péeksikinbaj
A wu'uyiken yéetel a xikin
Kin kuxtal ichil teech
Ti' anen ichil u puksi'ik'al
Chéen weenekeche'

Ti' anen ichil a náayo'ob
A wojel máaxen teen
Leti' le t'aan
Kuxa'an tu petenil Yucatán

Ta-Nehisi Coates: When you come back from that trip, when do you begin synthesizing from your jam sessions into music that you feel like will actually make it into the film?

Ludwig Göransson: That's a good question because what was very special about both Mexico City and Nigeria was that we recorded with, like, the traditional Mayan musicians in the daytime but also at night. At like 9:00 p.m. every night, I had different artists come.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Got it.

Ludwig Göransson: Rappers, singers. The Mexican music scene is crazy. Like, there's so much different regional Mexican music, and the only thing I had was, like, I had a playlist of 200 songs on iTunes. And I was listening through all these artists that was incredible. And I found some people that I really wanted to work with. I had an artist come in, and she only had like three songs out, and her voice sounded incredible.

[Con La Brisa from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

It was almost like an angel or, like -- it's something divine. While we were in Mexico, she came to the studio and recorded a song.

I was describing the scene under the water when he's introducing Talokan to her. He's taking Shuri on a trip and showing her his world. And that was just basically the script, and then we wrote a song around the script. And we finished that song that night.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That night?

Ludwig Göransson: Yeah. It has this kind of piano ambiance with, like, a super-fast kind of piano that goes di-di-di-di. And then she was singing vocals on it. It's called "Con La Brisa."

I hadn't seen any picture. So, like, after I come back from the Mexico trip, I started getting picture. That's when I'm really trying to see what sticks on the screen and what can stick in the movie. And as soon as I put in this song for that scene when he's showing Shuri the underwater world, it's like it fit in perfectly, like a glove.

[MUSIC SWELLS THEN FADES OUT]

And it doesn't feel like a needle drop.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No.

Ludwig Göransson: It feels like it was made for that – and it was made for that moment.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah.

Ludwig Göransson: But there's a lot -- and that's what's different with this movie. That's something that Ryan and me talked about for a long time, since we started making music for film. It's how can you tie score and songs together in the world-building of the movie and tie them together as one unit and not make them feel like they're two separate things?

Not making it feel like, "Oh, here's a needle drop here. Here's the song coming on. Here's..." You know?

[Con La Brisa from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

It's all flowing together as one emotion, and it never takes you out of the movie. You know, the songs are flowing into each other. The songs are flowing into the score. And it all serves as an incredible immersive experience.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah.

Ludwig Göransson: And I think that was something that we were able, for the first time, to achieve with this movie.

[MUSIC SWELLS THEN FADES OUT]

[VOICEOVER]

[Send Off from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Writing – the kind I do – is pretty lonely. You stare at your screen, you put together a bunch of mediocre sentences, you go on with your day, and then you wake and try to revise those sentences into something which does not embarrass you. Rinse. Repeat. And eventually you have an article, an essay, or maybe even a book. You get some company in the form of an editor if you're lucky, but that's a partnership. It's not a team.

Ryan has that loneliness, too, those moments when it's just him and the scraps of a story. But then there's the long collaborative work of writing and directing a film. That's where that team part comes in. I don't want to glamorize the process of film-making. I'm sure there are days when the cast and crew all annoy the crap out of each other. But there is something beautiful in such a diverse group of engineers coming together and building a machine that tells a story that not only entertains but makes us feel something in the process.

[MUSIC SWELLS]

By the way, we only scratched the surface of Ludwig's journey to make the score on the podcast. But there's a whole documentary series that really breaks his process down and shows you, with sound and pictures, the trips he and Ryan took around the world, the hundreds of hours of music they recorded, and the countless instruments and artists that came together to create the sounds and songs of Wakanda and Talokan.

[AUDIO CLIP]

Fadesere Adeola Oluwaseyi: Okay, so we have the vocals that says:

Àwa náà ré, a ò pò jù báyí lo,
Àwa náà ré, a ò pò jù báyí lo,
Àwa tí àn sé bebe ní ti àtíjọ.

-- which means, "Here we are. We are small but mighty. We've conquered battle before, and we will continue to conquer in battle."

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

The documentary series is called *Voices Rising: The Music of Wakanda Forever*. It's produced by Proximity Media and their partners. And you can catch it on Disney + starting February 22.

[Hiding In The Bathroom from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Fun fact: Ruth worked with Marvel's visual development team to create nine new superhero costumes for Wakanda Forever. That's two suits for Ironheart, The Midnight Angels, M'Baku, Nakia, Attuma, Namora, and, of course, Namor and the Black Panther. Next episode is all about those last two heroes.

We'll talk to Tenoch Huerta, who plays Namor...

Tenoch Huerta: There is a fantastic story. It's a little boy in a toy store and he take a Namor doll and he say, "This is my dad, he's like my dad." And his mom is saying, "No, no, no, no, no. Your dad is more ugly than this and this toy is beautiful."

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Cultural Consultant Dr. Gerardo Aldana...

Gerardo Aldana: My greatest fear when I was approached to work on this was that it was going to be indigeneity as a prop, which you see everywhere, right? "Oh, they're exotic. Oh they look cool, neat headdresses." And that was not it from the very beginning, and you see the result of that.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And the Black Panther herself, Letitia Wright.

Letitia Wright: The love that Shuri has for T'Challa is the love that Letitia has for Chadwick. And that's intertwined, and it's really hard to imagine a world where she has to go through that. And I have to go through that without him.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I'll be back next week with another chapter of Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast.

If you like the show, be sure to follow, rate, and review it on your favorite podcast app, and tell your friends and loved ones to do the same.

Learn more about our journey at ProximityMedia.com and follow [@ProximityMedia](https://twitter.com/ProximityMedia), [@Marvel](https://twitter.com/Marvel), and [@MarvelStudios](https://twitter.com/MarvelStudios) on Twitter and Instagram.

[Welcome Back from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast is a production of Proximity Media in collaboration with Marvel Studios and Marvel Entertainment.

The series is written and hosted by me, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and produced by Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and Paola Mardo. The film score is composed by Ludwig Göransson. James Kim is our Story Editor. Our Audio Editors are Cameron Kell and Cedric Wilson. Sound design and additional music is by Pat Mesiti-Miller. Lauryn Newson is our Audio Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant.

Special thanks to Octavia Ridout, Adam Cole, Susan Mueller, Lydia Ward, Courtney Archerd, Natalie Meade, and the Proximity Media team.

The character of the Black Panther was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Black Panther: Wakanda Forever is co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler. It is produced by Kevin Feige and Nate Moore and streaming only on Disney+.

I'm Ta-Nehisi Coates. Thanks for listening. I'll meet you back here next week.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[Welcome Back from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]