# Anime + Batman = Batmanime!

**Kevin Manthei talks about *Batman: Gotham Knight*.**
*Interview by S. Mark Rhodes*



Kevin Manthei has already forged an interesting and prolific body of work even at his (relatively) young age of 38. He is probably best known for his work scoring animation on such programs as *Invader ZIM*, *Xiaolin Showdown* and *Johnny Test*. In addition, he's scoring video games, including *Ultimate Spider Man*, *Shrek 2*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *City of Villians* and nearly 20 titles in the *Nancy Drew* PC series.

Manthei's profile has continued to rise: This year he has been involved with two of the higher-profile animation titles in recent memory. First, early 2008 saw him compose the score for the well-received Warner Bros. DVD release of *Justice League: The New Frontier* (based on the acclaimed Darwyn Cooke comic of the same name). He is also one of three composers to be involved with Warner Bros. highly anticipated release of *Batman: Gotham Knight*. This work consists of six anime inspired looks at Batman by several high profile anime masters including Yasuhiro Aoki and Futoshi Higashide. Manthei is one of three composers whose music accompanies this offbeat look at the Dark Knight. *FSM Online* recently sat down with Mr. Manthei to talk about his take on the mythical Bat-Man.

**FSM:** Was it difficult to do back-to-back projects involving superheroes?

**KM:** It wasn't too difficult because the animation in the two stories was so different. Both segments had such strong animation and strong stories that you were just kind of sucked in and it was fairly easy to write the music because of this. So, moving from *Justice League: The New Frontier* in the fall [2007] to having about a month-and-a-half off and then working on *Gotham Knight* allowed me the chance to clear my head and focus on what the Batman project needed. Interestingly enough, there are six segments of *Gotham Knight* and I scored two of the segments in two very different ways. So, even within this project I had to manage two different thought processes.

**FSM:** Was there ever talk that one composer might do all six segments within the *Gotham Knight* release?

**KM:** I believe that the idea was to have different composers for *Gotham Knight*. I think this idea came from Bruce Timm [producer of *Batman: Gotham Knight*] with the idea being that we would have different

composers just as *Gotham Knight* has a series of different anime creators for the different segments.

**FSM:** Did you get a sense of why you were approached for this particular project?

**KM:** I think it was because of the work I had just done on *Justice League*. One of the other composers, Rob Kral, had just worked on the score for *Superman: Doomsday* that was also a Warner Bros. DVD release. The third composer, Christopher Drake was chosen through a music-on-spec process.

**FSM:** Was there anything that particularly attracted you to *Gotham Knight*?

**KM:** The really exciting thing was that it was done in the anime style. I had never scored anything that looked so visually different. The "East meets West" idea was also very exciting. The first segment I did was called "Crossfire," which was very angular and odd. I felt like I was free to go beyond what I might have done with a standard 2-D animation. So, I was able to experiment with organic and electronic moments and was able to experiment more than usual in this anime context.

Even the second segment I scored, entitled "Working Through Pain," has an "East meets West" feel to it, but it is more of an Indian-style story with elements of transcendental meditation combined with traditional Western scoring elements.

**FSM:** Just to backtrack for a moment: There seemed to be a lot of '50s-style film music influence in the *New Frontier*—

**KM:** Yep.

**FSM:** —there was a strong sense of Bernard Hermann's influence and even some film noir stuff as well. Did you find yourself similarly influenced in *Batman: Gotham Knight*?

**KM:** It was more of a gut feeling I followed with *Gotham Knight*. *Justice League* had a very specific time and place and the *Justice League* story was just screaming for a particular referenced time period in the '50s. We were asking ourselves, "What kind of composers really defined that period?" Bernard Herrmann was a fairly obvious choice. Some of the film noir music I wrote was also indicative of the time period, as was the Sinatra-inspired big band music.



**Teaming Up:** *Justice League: A New Frontier*.

But with the Batman stuff in *Gotham Knight*, you are not necessarily sure where you are. Is it modern day? Is it another world? This allows the score to be much more experimental."

**FSM:** If a character like Batman is very familiar to you do you have a difficult time having a fresh

approach to the subject matter?

**KM:** I think you don't want to throw everything out that you have heard and that you know and have come to recognize as what Batman music can sound like. Of course, you are also trying to say something new and different but appropriate to what you are being asked to do.

Because there are six segments in the *Gotham Knight* collection and the idea is to do different takes on Batman, there was a kind of freedom to experiment with the music, too. In "Crossfire," for example, I created a lot of my own loops and electro-organic textures using various plug-ins and distortions and odd instruments, which allowed me to create a sound palette that I was able to use on the entire score.

I was able to incorporate this new kind of sound that I felt fit the story. Once he [Batman] comes in and takes charge I bring in more of a standard motif of Batman music.

In "Crossfire," he is more slow and deliberate and the music reflects this. I chose to use choral elements as the main part of his theme. So, it becomes more orchestral toward the end of the segment.



**A New Look:** Batman stars in the anime-styled *Batman: Gotham Knight*.

**FSM:** Was there anything you weren't able to work into the scores?

**KM:** For the "Working Through Pain" segment, my first pass on the music was more straightforward, and then Bruce Timm suggested to add more ethereal elements. That was something I was able to work into the score on my second pass, and, I'm really happy with how it turned out.

What would have been great is if we could have taken one of the segments and turned it into a full-length film where I could have explored further some of the musical ideas I was setting up.

**FSM:** The character of Batman is in both *Justice League: New Frontier* and *Gotham Knight*. How was it to reconcile the differences in tone for the same character in two very different projects?

**KM:** Batman in *Justice League* is a dark guy. He was always in the shadows meeting people like The Martian Manhunter and Superman. The *Justice League* Batman is similar to the *Gotham Knight* Batman in many senses. I played both of the versions with lower, slower-tempoed instruments and motifs. But, I think I took a completely different approach with Batman in *Gotham Knight* because the stories themselves dictated the musical approach, which was much more experimental and modern in tone.

**FSM:** Did you get to see any of the animation or a script on *Gotham Knight* before you began your work?

**KM:** We all [the composers] got some animatics beforehand. These were a little different than what I was used to seeing for 2-D. Generally, a traditional animatic is storyboards cut and filmed and put into motion. But for *Gotham Knight* a lot of these had nearly final segments already put in place, which helped get a better than usual sense of what the final animation would be. This kind of thing was a big help in inspiring me and then being able to ruminate on it for several weeks.

**FSM:** Did Bruce Timm give any of you a sense of why you were working on a particular episode?

**KM:** I remember when I was working on *Justice League* he said "I'm not sure what segment you are going to work on, but I'm going to figure it out." So, he pretty much did it on his own. Bruce speaks music really well, so I think it was best for him to choose on his own.

He did say that I was scoring one of his favorites and one of his least favorites. Both of the segments probably have less action than most of the other segments so that might have been on purpose [*laughs*]. "Crossfire" is slow and methodical and "Working Through Pain" is very dialogue-intense, and even the fight at the end is offbeat and has a more lyrical musical motif.

**FSM:** In your mind what is the key to scoring animation?

**KM:** Really, just scoring everything appropriately. So, if you are doing a comedy series you have to put that comedy in there and not be afraid to pull out the pizzicato strings and go to town. That said, I always try to do this without sounding clichéd.

The first animated series I did for Nickelodeon [*Invader ZIM*] has become well-known for its music, and the show danced frenetically between zany and goofy moments and intense and dramatic sequences.

Other shows like *Xiaolin Showdown*, which I did for Warner Bros., I tried to keep it more minimal. Again, Eastern and Western elements combined. I do try to score things like a film, but I don't try to be heavy-handed and over score. I think a lot of times animation is over scored, so I try not to do that and take a balanced approach. That is why these Warner Bros. straight-to-DVD features are such a luxury, because they are really films.

Sometimes I wonder if it were live action would I treat it the same musically. I guess I'm not sure, but with *Gotham Knight* I would say that it [the score] definitely would be identical whether animation or live action.

**FSM:** Yeah, Warner Bros. puts a lot of craftsmanship and thought into the projects that you have worked on of late.

**KM:** Yeah, you get the sense that the releases have an appropriate heaviness to them and their animated features feel real as opposed to hyper-real. A lot of the Hollywood blockbusters are so over-the-top that you can get forced into a position of having to take the music way over the top whether you want to or not.

**FSM:** Is this kind of thing your dream job? Were you a fan-boy type growing up?

**KM:** You know I really wasn't a huge comic fan. I did grow up as more of a gamer playing the Atari 2600 and the very first Apple systems. I remember playing the original *Castle Wolfenstein* games.

I was also into the piano and band and trumpet. So, I really didn't get into the whole comic book thing.

**FSM:** What about scoring for video games?

**KM:** When you are scoring for a game you are scoring more for location, styles and places in the game. So you are scoring for a particular level of the game, for instance. A lot of times you are either doing ambient music or very intense battle music. So, it is either adrenaline rush music or calm, sneaky kind of music.

One of the joys or working in film and television is that there is much more opportunity for diversity in your work. With games you have to have the music fit, but the energy of the game is either intense or resting, so I end up feeling like I am writing main title music all the time. But, one of the cool things about scoring for games is you can let your ideas flow better and not worry about hitting notes that you need to worry about hitting in a film. So that allows you to go with an idea until your idea runs out.

**FSM:** Are you working on anything now?

**KM:** I am possibly going to be working on a feature, but I am still in negotiations for that. I am also in various stages of four games right now. I just finished *Kung Fu Panda* and I am working on another *Shrek* title. I just finished my 19th *Nancy Drew* title [*laughs*]. I am also in negotiations on an unannounced Triple-A game title. I am in the middle of scoring some short films that are going to be tied in with a British soft drink manufacturer. Actually, they were apparently struck by my work on *Justice League* and wanted a classic '50s style score for this particular project. So that's kind of cool.


*The* Batman: Gotham Knight *soundtrack is due to be released on Jul. 22, and the* Justice League: New Frontier *soundtrack is available for purchase now. Both of these are available via [www.amazon.com](www.amazon.com) and [Lalalandrecords.com](Lalalandrecords.com).*

**—FSM**