

Music 2: This is Our Time

NOON SALIH: For many of us isolating at home this past year, music has been our one way out. It's what connects us with one another. It brings us together. And it shapes our perception of the world. In many ways, music is a universal language.

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CHRIS ATKINS: I think music is really powerful. I think no matter where you're from, music is a universal language. It's something that we all agree on. People have wedding songs. It's like people that have a theme song for their wedding. For their newborn.

Music is something which you associate with special moments in your life.

NOON SALIH: This is Chris Atkins, Senior Manager for Audio and Video Content at Expo 2020 Dubai.

And he's exactly right. Music soothes us as we go about our day and do errands. Or cook meals. Or power through an intense workout. It can lift us up when we're down. But it can also remind us of fond memories from childhood or other milestones in life. But most importantly, it brings the entire world together - especially during global events.

Today, we're looking at theme songs. And not just any theme song. We're talking about This is Our Time - the official theme song for Expo 2020 Dubai.

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NOON SALIH: And as the official song for the first Expo event in the Arab world, its significance spreads far and wide.

I'm Noon Salih and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Pretty much everyone you know has heard a theme song in their lives. Think of the World Cup. The Olympics. Or other global events that bring people of all nationalities together.

NOON SALIH: Take the 1998 Fifa World Cup in France, for example. Ricky Martin's epic hit, The Cup of Life, was not only the theme song for the event. It defined that moment in history. Many of us grew up with it. And heard it literally everywhere growing up. And for the listeners who weren't alive at the time: It was a big deal. It still is a big deal.

Shakira's Waka Waka, This Time for Africa from the 2010 Fifa World Cup is another emblematic theme that still resonates far and wide today. In fact, the Expo team members were even inspired by it.

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But before we had theme songs like those, we had national anthems.

CHRIS ATKINS: I would say the early theme songs were our national anthems of countries. You associate that a country is proud and they play their national anthem. If you can't say it in words, you sing it out loud and that's happened throughout history, I think.

NOON SALIH: Theme songs can also represent turning points or historic times. Like in 2000 when The Scorpions performed Wind of Change at the 2000 Hannover Expo in Germany. And to this day, many associate this song with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

And in line with historic change, Expo 2020's This is Our Time represents the current moment that brought us at a crossroads: a global pandemic that is impacting every single one of us. And one that has pushed many of us to rethink our life choices and cherish what matters most.

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NOON SALIH: Theme songs don't only bring people together. They provide what is called "sonic branding." Or branding through sound rather than just images or logos. And Chris Atkins wanted to do just that.

CHRIS ATKINS: Often we're too consumed about visual cues and people tend to not think about audio cues. And that's very powerful. Just how radio is very powerful.

So a few examples would be when you sit down at the end of a long day, you turn on your TV. And the first thing you hear is ding ding. And obviously everyone

knows that's the Netflix jingle. All you need to do is hear that jingle and you know exactly what the brand is.

Another one would be.. which is Nokia and that's how powerful music is. That's how powerful sonic branding is.

NOON SALIH: And he wanted This is Our Time to be associated with Expo Dubai. And that's exactly what happened. They want it to reflect the themes of Expo 2020. And in his own words they want the theme song to center around "the now." "Not later, not tomorrow. Now."

CHRIS ATKINS: If you come to Expo, you'll know that we have three main sub themes, three main districts, which are sustainability, opportunity, and mobility.

We wanted visitors to be able to go to any part of the sites, close their eyes and know exactly which district they're in just by listening to the sounds around them.

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CHRIS ATKINS: So for example, if you go to mobility and you close your eyes, you'll be hearing synths and fast beats and hyperloops, but you'll also hear "This is Our Time" arranged in a very kind of modern, dance-y kind of way which is which is great because it kind of shows you how many ways a melody or a song can be arranged to come to feel completely different. But you still have that recall that it's the Expo theme song. That it's the Expo sonic identity.

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NOON SALIH: So when Chris decided to embark on this massive project, he began to brainstorm. As he sat in his office in Dubai in 2019, he had a flashback to his childhood. He remembered hearing his first theme song almost two decades earlier.

CHRIS ATKINS: The very first theme song that I remember was in 1992. And I would have been 10 years old and it was the Barcelona Olympics theme song. And that was done by Freddie Mercury and Monserrat Caballé.

CHRIS ATKINS: And a lot of theme songs have obviously been in English and then the native tongue of the country where it's being held.

And that's how our theme song started.

NOON SALIH: And so Chris rolled up his sleeves and immediately thought of one person that could make this happen: His long time friend and composer Joe Dickinson. He called him up, told him what he had in mind, and asked him to send a demo.

CHRIS ATKINS: Our brief to Joe, was that this song had to be the best song ever. And he said "no problem," in a very sarcastic tone.

JOE DICKINSON: It's a bit of pressure. Because everyone's like, we want it to be the biggest and we want this to be massive and we want everyone to be able to dance, but we also want it upbeat.

And it's like, how am I going to do this? I'm going to make it work.

NOON SALIH: That's Joe Dickinson. Joe and his wife Lucy - also a writer and singer - joined forces. They used their spare room turned studio, in their Lambourn home, in a small village almost two hours west of London. And in that soundproof studio, with guitars hanging on their walls, Joe and Lucy began drafting the Expo 2020 theme song.

Just one week later, they managed to send over a demo to Chris over Whatsapp.

NOON SALIH: Joe drew inspiration from songs with epic music, like Rise Like a Phoenix. A pop song that became popular at Eurovision's Song Contest in 2014.

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But Brainstorming wasn't exactly...linear. So Joe and Lucy found different ways to get inspired. Like listening to a shared playlist.

JOE DICKINSON: I think it's got like 600 tracks on it and it's something you can put on without thinking too hard. And it's got to be all songs that you can't skip. And that's our rule that you don't skip songs on the playlist. So they've all got to be good songs.

But then I've got my own playlist, which is more, my big orchestral playlist. And I'm always trying to put that on. But..

NOON SALIH: But.. it's not for everyone.

JOE DICKINSON: It's a lot of ballads. It's a lot of Disney. And quite a few acapella songs in there and...orchestral, emotional, kind of big music.. So, yeah, a car journey

with me isn't - you know - my wife hates it sometimes because I put on this horrible epic music and she just wants to listen to Coldplay or something.

NOON SALIH: And when Joe's ideas became more concrete, he reached out to Canadian producer Greg Wells, now based in Los Angeles. Wells has produced for Dua Lipa, Elton John, and Aerosmith. To name a few.

And that was when things suddenly got very real. It suddenly expanded to become a massive collaborative project that spanned countries, languages and time zones.

To start - the Expo team decided that the lyrics had to be both in English...and Arabic.

NOON SALIH: They also fused Emirati, Arab and Western orchestral beats. And Chris felt that Joe, who lived both in Dubai and the UK was most suited for this role.

CHRIS ATKINS: Dubai's a melting pot of all nationalities and often events and TV commercials. The music has to appeal to all different nationalities and he always, he always nailed the tracks and, that's why I wanted him to come on board for this track, this song.

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NOON SALIH: From there it became a worldwide collaborative effort spanning seven cities. And they even included two orchestras. Like one called Fame's Macedonian Symphonic Orchestra, from Skopje, North Macedonia.

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And another 16-player Egyptian string orchestra led by conductor Tamer Faizy.
And a youth choir with almost 20 students from all over the world. [Pause]

And, of course, last but not least, the three main singers: Emirati legends Hussain Al-Jassmi and Almas - and Lebanese-American Mayssa Karaa.

CHRIS ATKINS: I came across this YouTube video, a ten-year old YouTube video, and it's actually Hussain on Egyptian TV, I think. And he's singing hello by Lionel Richie obviously in English. And, literally after like five seconds of him singing this, I had an instant connection with him because he's singing my language.

ARCHIVAL: Hussain Al-Jassmi singing "Hello"

CHRIS ATKINS: Because people nowadays watch music, like they do on Youtube, I really wanted the world to see this seven foot tall guy in a kandura and the first things, the first thing that would come out of his mouth would be "follow me, one voice, one family."

NOON SALIH: He's not exactly seven feet tall... but let's just say he's very noticeable from far.

He has hits that topped the charts throughout the Arab world.

Like the classic "Seta El-Sobh" - or "six in the morning" in English - released almost a decade ago.

CHRIS ATKINS: When we think of Hussain Al-Jasmi, you could probably think of him like the Robbie Williams of the UK, the Bon Jovi of America. He is kind of that famous in the UAE.

NOON SALIH: And while this was the first Expo theme song to have Arab musical influences, it drew inspiration from many other theme songs in history that blended local and international music.

Like the song “We Are One” at the 2014 Fifa World Cup in Brazil, which blended Portuguese, Spanish and English lyrics, as well as Brazilian Samba and pop beats.

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NOON SALIH: After two years of all this tremendous work, it was finally time to mix everything together. But the file was..massive...Joe’s computer almost completely died on him.

Luckily, Chris had a solution. And thought of one person that could mix everything together and make it happen: sound engineer Kevin Churko - based in Las Vegas.

CHRIS ATKINS: I remember the first day Kevin loaded up the session from Joe and, I think he had a mini heart attack that the track is about 180 tracks. And it's actually the second largest session he's ever had to mix.

NOON SALIH: For reference, Kevin is the sound engineer for music legends like Ozzy Osbourne and Papa Roach. Millennials would know who I’m talking about.

NOON SALIH: And after all that effort in September 2021...it was time to release the song. But....the team didn't get too excited just yet.

That's because things didn't quite feel real until they had what many musicians call...the "car test."

CHRIS ATKINS: I don't know if you've ever heard of the car test. When you first start making music and or produce music, you'd always kind of go into your car and listen to the mix that you did in your bedroom.

It sounds great in your bedroom, but when you take it to the car it sounds rubbish. And it's always a very depressing moment.

And I just remember, one of the UAE's biggest radio presenters bigging our song up and then playing it. And it just sounded amazing.

NOON SALIH: Chris remembers when he went to the dress rehearsal of the opening ceremony.

MUSIC: This is Our Time opening ceremony

CHRIS ATKINS: It was amazing. I got goosebumps. My wife was like punching me because she was so excited for me and people were turning around and waving at me. And I think that's when I felt really proud and I didn't even write the song. It was just something that I gave birth to. But I just felt so proud.

NOON SALIH: And when the world watched This is Our Time being performed at the opening ceremony. Joe. Chris. And the huge team all watched in awe. But because of the pandemic many of them had to watch from their homes.

JOE DICKINSON: The opening show was humongous. It was like this, this massive event where they're kind of announcing Expo to the world and they had Andrea Bocelli, Ellie Goulding, and all these big stars, and the song was being performed live for the first time in that show.

So that was a weird one, kind of sat in my living room. It's raining outside. And I kind of got a blanket over me and we're watching this like balmy hot Dubai and this glamorous big event and stuff. And I had my mom and dad watching that one as well. So it was, that was cool.

MUSIC

CHRIS ATKINS: And I remember driving to work And I remember it was the first ever worldwide radio play of the song. And that's like the Freddie Mercury moment as like a ten-year-old watching this theme song and. You know, now I'm 37 and I created a theme song for the biggest event in history. And it's a really proud moment.

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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