



Of Love, Loss and Music: How Scot Stafford's Daughter Influenced 'Ultraman: Rising's Score

The Emmy Award-winning composer shares for the first time how his daughter's serious accident, in the middle of production, brought him even closer to his role as a parent while influencing his work writing music for a film with so many uncomfortable parallels about trying – and sometimes failing - to protect one's family.

By **Victoria Davis** | Wednesday, November 13, 2024 at 2:20pm

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'Ultraman: Rising,' now streaming on Netflix. All images © 2024 Netflix, Inc.

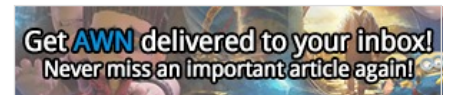
One moment. An instant. That's all it takes to change someone's story. One single moment to define the people we are, the parents we are, and the ones we could be. Thus, it felt poetic that the difference between the musical themes of *Ultraman: Rising's* hero, Ken Sato, and villain, Dr. Onda, was one single note.

"At the beginning of the story, Ken and his family survive the kaiju attack because Ken's father, Ultraman, saves them," explains the film's Emmy Award-winning composer, **Scot Stafford**. "Meanwhile, Onda is in that same apartment, and he loses his family. The difference between their two musical themes is one note moved by the shortest possible distance. It's an E going down a tiny bit to an E flat. And that changes everything."

Sitting in the interview room with Stafford at Lucasfilm's Industrial Light & Magic studio, where Netflix's *Ultraman: Rising* was produced, I shared with him my own E-to-E-flat life-altering moment: losing my first child, a boy, who was stillborn. Stafford takes a deep breath and says, "Because you shared that with me, I'm giving you an exclusive. And I will only talk about this once."

He continues, "I was about three quarters of the way through scoring the entire feature. My then 15-year-old daughter was in a very, very serious accident, was hospitalized for almost three months and had four brain surgeries. I, my wife and the whole family were going through absolute hell and I still had to compose. So, when I was looking at those scenes, I knew what was at stake and it absolutely informed everything I created in those scenes."

In *Ultraman: Rising*, from directors Shannon Tindle and John Aoshima, Ken Sato, a star baseball player and son of the original Ultraman, reluctantly returns home to Tokyo to take on his father's duties in order to protect his homeland against a rising number of monster attacks. However, things take on an added layer of complexity when the superhero is compelled to adopt a 35-foot-tall, fire-breathing baby kaiju monster named Emi after the infant's mother is presumed dead. In



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addition to learning how to defend his home city, Sato finds himself quickly learning how to become a parent. As Sato's affection for his adopted daughter grows, so do the forces bent on hunting her down as part of their own dark plans.



The film, now streaming on Netflix, tackles father-son reconciliation, parental loss (for both human and kaiju), and the heart-breaking truth that, even though we love our children more than life itself, that love isn't always powerful enough to protect them. When Stafford's daughter Amelia was seriously injured in her e-bike accident, that message hit him harder than ever before.

"That concept... it's not quite something I can really talk about without completely falling apart," shares Stafford. "But yeah. I was right there. I was so present for any moment in that film where parenting was depicted so honestly and so accurately and so emotionally. Even the scenes where Emi is stomping around in her own poop, I loved. I still don't know how Shannon did it, how he was able to create, in his own words, this *Kramer vs. Kramer* family drama against the backdrop of this massive, international superhero action movie. Any moment that was family-focused, I was ready. I was game."

Tindle meanwhile, who has worked with Stafford for roughly 10 years, says he doesn't know how Stafford continued to compose in the middle of any parent's worst nightmare. Tindle, who has a young daughter of his own, still remembers when he got the call about Amelia.

"We were in the height of production and had flown out to visit the team in Singapore," he recalls. "When we got off the plane, I opened my phone and I got a text from Scot saying, 'Amelia has been in a horrible accident. I'll tell you more later.' And then all our phones were buzzing. Scot and I have been close friends ever since we met and I'm close with his family. I just told him, 'I'm here if you need me.' When Scot was able to tell me what happened - I might get a little emotional talking about this - he was still insistent on delivering the music for the film."

Tindle adds, "That blew me away. But I'm not surprised, because Scot is who he is. And it's an incredible score. I will forever be grateful for that."



Amelia's accident happened around the point in the film where we find Emi's mother is still alive, a poignant twist in the *Ultraman* story and, after all the surgeries and months of recovery, Amelia too was able to go home. This past summer, the young teen spoke at the Sacramento, California capitol, giving her statement on e-bike safety to the Department of Transportation and the State Senate. After Amelia's speech, AB 1778, a pilot program to reduce injury risk for under-16-aged riders on Class 2 e-bikes, passed unanimously. At the end of September, the bill, introducing age restrictions and helmet requirements in Marin County, became law.

"It's been just over one year after the accident that nearly tore us apart," says Stafford. "And that scene where you see Dr. Onda watching old footage of his wife and daughter just before they're killed by the kaiju Gigantron, and seeing that Ultraman failed to save them, just completely breaks my heart. And in that final scene, where Ken sacrifices himself to save everyone, to save his family, everyone is thinking about Ken. But Dr. Onda is sacrificing himself too. If you listen to that music, it's actually Onda's theme you're listening to, of a father who has lost everything."

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But luckily, and thankfully, that wasn't the Stafford family story.

"I was in a color session when I found out that our team got 10 Emmy nominations for *Lost Ollie* and I called Scot to tell him he'd been nominated and he said to me, 'Someone wants to say hey,' shares Tindle. "It was the first time I'd heard Amelia's voice in a long time. I will never forget that day."



Though not technically a father himself, Aoshima took on, in Tindle's words, "an instrumental role" in raising his siblings and has had his own experiences with life nearly turning on a dime.

"My sisters both, independently, snuck my mom's car out and crashed," states Aoshima. "I never drove back home so fast. I can relate to Ken's anxieties and frustrations."

"I was there both times he got the calls," adds Tindle, who was roommates with Aoshima while attending California Institute of the Arts. "I watched John many times be a parent in that way."

Taking on the "dad role" was something Aoshima and his older brother shouldered in their family, maintaining the home when their mom was away for business a month or so at a time. But working on *Ultraman* also helped Aoshima to realize the sacrifices his mother had made as a single parent to keep the lights on in the house and food on the table.

"It didn't really hit me until I started to tap into what that means in the film and the importance of parenthood," shares Aoshima. "And the film not only shows what it means to be a parent but the call to action of caring for another, especially an innocent child. I was around 12 or 13 when I was helping my sisters as infants. And now one of my younger sisters is a mom herself and that's been fun, to watch her raise my niece, who is also named Emi."

Visual effects supervisor Hayden Jones who, like Aoshima, is a proud uncle, adds, "I think the beauty of what Shannon wrote and what we all brought to life are emotional stories that are able to connect with everybody. And I think, even though they resonate very vividly for parents, I think *Ultraman: Rising* has something for everyone. I read the script, I watched the first screener where it was all still boards, and I had goose bumps up both arms. By the end, I was in tears."



Whether a parent, uncle, aunt, brother or sister, everyone on the *Ultraman* crew agreed the experience working on this film was "profound."

"*Ultraman*, because it had these themes and these powerful emotions, it actually did kind of become my therapy," says Stafford. "Tavi, my eldest, was born ten weeks premature. Amelia went through her accident... and what's more is how many people are going through or have gone through something like that. One day I was visiting Amelia at the hospital and my Uber driver shared that his twin girls had been treated at the same hospital for two months. These stories – that moment shit hits the fan – connect people to each other."



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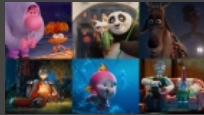
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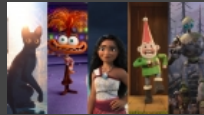
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