

Carrier is an immersive podcast that left me on the edge of my seat

There are a ton of podcasts out there, but finding the right one can be difficult. In our new column Pod Hunters, we cover what we've been listening to that we can't stop thinking about.

I'd recommend against listening to QCode's latest podcast while driving. When I queued up *Carrier* for the first time to listen while running errands, I jumped out of my seat when it kicked off with an intense introduction that bounced the sound from speaker to speaker, and closed with the blaring horn of a tractor trailer truck.

That was a good example of the tension that the rest of the series would bring. The serialized podcast introduces us to Raylene, an African American truck driver who's been pulled over by a state trooper. The traffic stop pulls her off schedule and puts her into a bind, and when the opportunity to pick up a sealed trailer for a mysterious company arises, she jumps at the chance. Her cargo comes with some strict requirements: the trailer has to be kept cooled to a certain temperature, and she has to drop it off by 5AM in Chicago. It's strange, and soon after she hits the road, she begins to have second thoughts, especially when she realizes that her cargo might be some sort of strange creature.

The series comes from QCode, the studio that released *Blackout* earlier this year. Like its predecessor (which featured *Mr. Robot*'s Rami Malik), it features a high-profile lineup of actors: Cynthia Erivo (*Widows*, *Bad Times at the El Royale*) voices Raylene, while Martin Starr (*Silicon Valley*), Lamorne Morris (*New Girl*) and Lance Reddick (*The Wire*, *Fringe*) are

also part of the cast. But while the actors bring the intense story to life, what really sets the series apart is the studio's attention to sound design, putting together a world that had me listening at the edge of my seat – and sometimes jumping right out of it.

You can listen to *Carrier* on Apple Podcasts, Player.FM, and Spotify.



Image: QCode

Carrier creator Dan Blank tells *The Verge* that he worked for years in Hollywood, and had been working on a bunch of ambitious feature-length projects. “It had become kind of

frustrating," he says. "There are a lot of factors required to make a movie." He explained that *Carrier* came about because he wanted something that was "very, very small, a story that could be one location, with a few characters, and nothing that would break a budget to produce."

He settled on the idea of a truck driver who picked up an unsettling cargo, and who would have considerable trouble turning to others for help. He says that he particularly wanted to focus on how African American women made up a tiny fraction of drivers on the road, and at how the industry has rapidly changed with new regulations and technology. "It's a very different industry than in what we know from the 70s' movies and country songs."

As he was working on that story, film agent Rob Herting left CAA to found his audio production studio QCode. The two had already been talking, and they decided to shift the project from a film and into an audio drama.

Blank noted there were things you could do with an audio drama "that you just can't do in a television series or a movie." Specifically, he felt that an audio drama would allow him to better develop the characters in a way that a feature film just wouldn't allow, and that good sound design could enhance the story.

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That emphasis on sound design was a big part of the production, Blank says. He and his production team worked to make the show as immersive as possible. "I'm worried about people doing surgery or riding bikes or something because there is definitely some stuff that's intended to scare you." The sound moves from side to side, and adds a visceral level of tension as you listen.

To get that effect, Blank says that they used a technique called binaural audio, a process that is designed to simulate

how ears capture sound. "It's a little different than using two microphones to create stereo sound," he explains. "What we actually did was use a mannequin's dummy head with two microphones in sculpted ears." They had actors act against the head on a stage, and brought it out alongside roads to record sound, giving listeners the impression of space around them. "We also did some stuff in post production, where you simulate that effect." The result is an immersive soundscape that brings a depth to the story that you don't typically find in an audio story.

Blank says that he's become enamored of audio as a medium, and plans to continue to push the experience further in upcoming projects. "We've done this one, so what's the next thing that we can do that pushes this further? There's so much left to explore."

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