Screen Sound is a peer-refereed research journal facilitated by Dr Rebecca Coyle (Southern Cross University, Australia), Editorial Assistant Natalie Lewandowski (Macquarie University, Sydney) and designer Alex Mesker.

ISSN 1838–3343 (Print)
ISSN 1838–3351 (Online)

e-correspondence address: editor@screensoundjournal.org

The opinions expressed in articles in this journal are those of the authors alone.

Copyright for articles published in this journal is held jointly by the authors and Screen Sound and no reproduction of material is allowed without permission.

Contents

Editorial 5-8
Sound Tracks the Place: Australasian Soundtrack Studies
Rebecca Coyle

Features

Undead and Its ‘Undecidable’ Soundtrack 9-20
James Wierzbicki

Numinous Ambience: Spirituality, Dreamtimes and Fantastic Aboriginality 21-34
Philip Hayward

More Than Noise: The Integrated Sound Track of Noise 35-46
Nick Hadland

Sounding East Of Everything: Australian Television, Music and Place 47-58
Liz Giuffre

Shorts and Trailers

The Brian May Collection: Two Decades of Screen Composition 59-66
Michael Hannan

Documenting Sound: An Interview with Screen Composer 67-77
Trevor Coleman
Henry Johnson

Music for The Silent One: An Interview with Composer 79-91
Jenny McLeod
Riette Ferreira

Contributor Profiles 92-93
This page is intentionally left blank
EDITORIAL
Sound Tracks The Place: Australasian Soundtrack Studies

Rebecca Coyle

Abstract
This is the inaugural issue of a new open access journal of screen sound studies. The aim of Screen Sound: The Australasian Journal of Soundtrack Studies is to investigate, analyse and document sound as it occurs in relation to screen images, on the large or small screen, in installation or online. Sound elements, functions and production are included in their various forms. The journal is multidisciplinary in its remit, accommodating music, sound, media, cultural, marketing and economic analysis.

Keywords
Soundtrack, screen studies, Australasia, journal

Introduction: Framing ScreenSound

Sound provides an essential element of most moving image audiovisual texts. Analysing this component in the context of the whole enables a better understanding and increased knowledge of the audiovisual product’s operation, effects and production. Film music and sound appear to have ‘come of age’ if the recent crop of books, new journals, industry publications, international conferences and tertiary courses is any indication. Screen Sound is informed by this activity. However, the journal also builds on scholarly work in other fields of endeavour, such as television, animation, sound art, radio and online studies. The inclusion of – and interest in – sound and music in screen forms such as television, advertising, games, screen art installation and mobile telephonic technology enables the publication to complement and add to film music and sound research. This issue features articles on feature films, television series, documentary films and various scores by a composer who worked across several media forms.

In its interpretation of ‘screen sound’ as encompassing the performance of dialogue, sound effects and atmospheres, sound design, score and source music, Screen Sound engages in an holistic approach to the operation of the soundtrack in these audiovisual forms. In addition, the journal emphasises the contextual background to the soundtrack through several mechanisms. Articles are clustered around three types, that is, longer, academically informed (and double blind refereed) contributions, shorter or interview-based (single-refereed) reports, and
edited reviews, debates, brief reports and reprints of significant items. *Screen Sound*’s Industry Advisory Board includes members of key stakeholder organizations and other experienced individuals from Australia and New Zealand who provide important industry-informed input.

The project of *Screen Sound: The Australasian Journal of Soundtrack Studies* evolved from research into Australian film sound. Two anthologies edited by the author – *Screen Scores* (1998) and *Reel Tracks* (2005) – and an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project have resulted in a body of work on music in post-Revival (late 1960s to the present) feature films. The four-year ARC project (that commenced in 2007) brought together the work of Michael Hannan in the Contemporary Music program at Southern Cross University (SCU) with popular and film music scholar Philip Hayward, formerly from Macquarie University in Sydney (now also at SCU). This work has built upon and supplemented research by scholars who have positioned local screen sound analyses in international fora, for example, the conference and publication activities by Melbourne filmmaker Philip Brophy (see the 3 *Cinesonic* volumes 1999, 2000, 2001), the semiotic models and analyses of Theo van Leeuwen and Anne Cranny-Francis (both now located at the University of Technology, Sydney), and the Music Genre anthologies published by Equinox under the guidance of Sydney-based series editor Mark Evans. In Canberra, Roger Hillman has introduced several Australian National University students of the field, in part through his own European cinema and musicology studies. This and other work\(^1\) simultaneously positions Australian research in international contexts while enabling scrutiny of the homegrown product and how it increasingly operates within trans-national industries.

*Screen Sound* can be differentiated from other recent screen music/sound journal initiatives (such as UK-based *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* and *The Soundtrack* and New York-based *Music and the Moving Image*) by its particular association with a specific region. Australasia is commonly defined as Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and neighbouring islands in the southern Pacific Ocean. Where a growing body of research now exists in relation to Australian film music, such studies are less established in New Zealand and the Pacific.\(^2\) An important and long-term goal of *Screen Sound* is to provide a focus for research activities related to these countries. We are also interested to engage in screen sound studies as they are developing in the South-east Asian region and therefore the journal’s borders are somewhat porous. In support of such an initiative, our Editorial Board includes scholars from Eastern Asian countries, including screen music scholars Giorgio Biancorosso in Hong Kong and Kyoko Koizumi in Tokyo. The publication will provide a forum for case studies and debates relevant to a broad region outside the limits of North America and the European continent. Given that the screen industries operating in our region interact with but are not the same as those in the Americas and Europe, the journal’s remit is to analyse the region’s texts and practices as alternative yet sustainable models. Noting the relative paucity of screen sound articles related to this region in other international publications, *Screen Sound* offers the opportunity to focus on, promote and build upon this regionally defined work. We invite all contributions relating to screen sound productions relevant to the region. Ultimately, the journal’s principal objective is to facilitate a critical mass of studies and thereby enable the formulation of models that reflect the texts and practices in the region.

\(^1\) Comprehensive literature reviews are available in those volumes listed and on the ARC Discovery Project site titled Australian Cinema Soundtrack Research at http://acsr.smss-online.org/.

\(^2\) See the work of Henry Johnson and Dan Bendrups in Dunedin, and Nabeel Zuberi in Auckland.
Notions of Place/Space

The title of this issue – ‘Sound Tracks the Place’ – suggests its central theme, namely, the concept of place. Several articles explore how sound and music refer to place and locale. At the close of the first decade of this millennium, it is relevant to re-state how culture and communication have been affected by the technological enablement of the internet. Moving beyond technological determinism, the internet has also challenged the notion of place. While the network has enabled people to communicate more freely, this has assisted the desire for more physical travel. At the same time as online networks have challenged locational boundaries, they have also assisted the designation of niches and targeted audiences. The debut issue of an online, open access journal addresses both the global network and the specific interest group of ‘soundies’ situated in a variety of disciplines and locations.

Place also operates in relation to the screen industries, where location is suggested in narrative and onscreen (however much the storyline speaks to general themes beyond such boundaries). Sound can trigger images of specific locations for the hearer/viewer, and images on screen can be associated with locationally-specific sounds to assist in the rendition of place. Yet sound and music personnel contributing to a production may be physically dispersed and bring a diverse range of sounds to the mix. Ultimately, too, sound as a phenomenon is difficult to ‘contain’, so mapping place via sound offers an intriguing future prospect.

Relating to the concept of geographical designation, our first issue features several analyses of ‘place’ in screen soundtracks. James Wierzbicki discusses the music in an Australian zombie film, Undead (Peter Spierig, Michael Spierig, 2003), by referring to contemporary cinematic explorations of the zombie. Like other Australian films exploring inexplicable forces, Undead may well be about the search for settler and indigenous identity more broadly, as well as contemporary conservative attempts to keep migrants/refugees (‘aliens’) out. Philip Hayward’s analysis of Peter Weir’s The Last Wave (1977) furthers this interest with a discussion of music and spirituality in relation to Australian Aboriginality. The film positions indigenous issues in the urban Sydney setting using musical elements including the iconic Aboriginal instrument, the didjeridu. While the didjeridu was originally devised in a specific northern Australia location, in Australian cinema it has come to ‘speak’ for the continent, various peoples and indigeneity. Nick Hadland investigates the way that the sound design in Matthew Saville’s arthouse thriller Noise (2007) locates suburban dysfunction in Melbourne. Sonic elements represent both the claustrophobic location inside a caravan and the central protagonist’s battle with tinnitus. In her discussion of the Australian television series East Of Everything (first broadcast 2008), Liz Giuffre uncovers the ways in which location (in and around the north-eastern New South Wales backpacker mecca of Byron Bay) informed the original music compositions and selection of source songs.

In the second section of this issue of Screen Sound, Michael Hannan reports on the collection of scores by Australian film composer Brian May, who (locally) is primarily known for his work on cult-Australian Mad Max films although he also successfully composed for USA productions. Henry Johnson’s interview with New Zealand composer, Trevor Coleman, indicates how geographical location need not be a constraint in documentary music productions screened to broadly

**Conclusion: Future ‘Spaces’**

Place and space will continue to inform future articles in *Screen Sound*. Each issue will have a collection of articles clustered around a theme. The next issue will focus on improvisation and practices using comprovisation (in which composed scores accommodate elements of improvisation) and we invite contributions. We also welcome feedback and comments on the *Screen Sound* initiative and this issue, as any new endeavour can only benefit from such input. Feedback may take the form of response articles to the published work presented here. We look forward to an active engagement with Australasian soundtrack studies now and in the future.

**Acknowledgements:**

*Screen Sound: The Australasian Journal of Soundtrack Studies* was developed as part of Australia Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP0770026 ‘Music production and technology in Australian film: enabling Australian film to embrace innovation’.

Sincere and heartfelt thanks to SSJ Editorial Board members, Editorial Assistant Natalie Lewandowski, and colleague and mentor Philip Hayward for advice and assistance with the development of this initiative and to Alex Mesker for design and technological work.

**Bibliography**


UNDEAD AND ITS UNDECIDABLE SOUNDTRACK

James Wierzbicki

Abstract

Michael and Peter Spierig’s 2003 feature Undead is a curious production that is both a comic riff on zombie movies and a serious science-fiction story. This article shows that the film does not simply alternate between the two plot modes; rather, in many instances, it simultaneously features elements of comedy and drama, with one intruding into the territory of its opposite in such a way that the narrative often seems to be hovering – like the classic zombie that is neither dead nor alive – in the liminal space between the two modes. More significantly, the essay argues that, while Cliff Bradley’s (extra-diegetic) score enables the film to shift smoothly from one mode to the other, it is largely Peter Spierig’s subtle sound design that allows the film to be both comic and serious at the same time, to have the zombie-like quality of what Jacques Derrida, in his writings on literature and politics, calls ‘undecidability’.

Keywords

Spierig, Undead, zombie, undécidabilité, soundtrack.

Introduction

Many reviews in the popular media1 have remarked that the Brisbane-based Spierig brothers’ 2003 Undead is, for better or worse, not one film but two: whereas the first film (the one that has garnered most of the publicity) is a comic riff on zombie movies, the second is a largely serious – albeit bafflingly cryptic – science-fiction story centered on a visitation by extraterrestrials.

Strands from the one occasionally entangle with the narrative thread of the other but, in general, Undead does not for textually interweave them. The zombie and science-fiction tales are for the most part kept quite separate, and the rather obvious spot at which the two plotlines are knotted together is located just before the 104-minute film’s midpoint. After having battled countless zombies in action sequences that look and sound increasingly cartoonish, the six central characters find that their vehicular escape from the fictitious small town of Berkeley is blocked

by a metallic wall of staggering height. “This can’t be real,” says the female protagonist, her voice starting to tremble with desperation. Yet the underscore at this point suggests that the situation is indeed real, or at least as real as things ever get in a horror film. A moment later her male counterpart, quietly echoing a theme that has resonated in Australian fiction at least since the 1870s (Turcotte 1998: 12–15; Gelder 2007: 118–22), mutters: “We’re all fenced in.”

In a film characterised by giddy and gory comedy, this highlighted moment of transition stands out as being unusually serious. But comparable tiny instants occur throughout Undead. They mark not bold shifts from one theatrical mode to the other but, rather, little tremors during which the solidly established ground of comedy or drama shakes just a bit. Disruptive only enough to remind audience members that whatever they think they might be absorbing is not quite what it seems, they are constant signs that in terms of film genre Undead is seldom completely this or that, that it seems almost always to be hovering – like the classic zombie that is neither dead nor alive – in the liminal space between one and the other.

Many of these intrusions – of the serious into the comic, of the comic into the serious – are purely visual, and often conveyed by means of actors’ facial expressions (as main protagonist René [Felicity Mason] wears an intense mask even in the most hilarious scenes; in contrast, Emma Randall in a supporting role as a deputy constable even in the most sober episodes tends to look bug-eyed in a way that calls to mind the trademark visage of Lou Costello in, for example, Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein). But just as many of Undead’s intrusions of one genre into the other are not visual but aural, the more overt of these sonic ‘signals’ are transmitted via the score by New Zealand composer Cliff Bradley; and the more subtle of them – and thus the more intriguing - are found in the ‘sound design’ credited to Peter Spierig.

Zombie theory

Peter and Michael Spierig's Undead provokes laughs aplenty, and in its basically comic treatment of zombies it not only anticipates such recent films as Andrew Currie’s 2006 Fido, Edgar Wright’s 2004 Shaun of the Dead, and Matthew Leutwyler’s 2004 Dead & Breakfast but also embellishes on formulas established in 1992 by Sam Raimi’s Army of Darkness and Peter Jackson’s Braindead and in

---

2 The 1948 Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (Charles Barton) was the first of a series of films produced by Universal in which the famous team (tall, lean ‘straight man’ Bud Abbott and short, fat comedian Lou Costello) was matched with horror film icons. Other films in the series are Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man (Charles Lamont, 1951), Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Charles Lamont, 1953), and Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy (Charles Lamont, 1955). As much as was possible, the comedy films employed scores by composers who had proven themselves with ‘serious’ horror films. Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein, for example, features a score by Frank Skinner, whose credits by this time included Son of Frankenstein (Rowland V. Lee, 1939), The Invisible Man Returns (Joe May, 1940), The Mummy’s Hand (Christy Cabanne, 1940), The Wolf Man (George Wagnner, 1941), and The Mummy’s Ghost (Reginald Le Borg, 1943); Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy featured music by Hans J. Salter, who earlier had provided Universal with music for such sequel thrillers as The Ghost of Frankenstein (Erle C. Kenton, 1942), Frankenstei Meet the Wolf Man (Roy William Neill, 1942), Son of Dracula (Robert Siodmak, 1943), The Invisible Man’s Revenge (Ford Beebe, 1944), and House of Frankenstein (Erle C. Kenton, 1944).

3 Bradley was born in Dunedin in 1974 and studied composition with Nigel Westlake and Philip Bracanin at the University of Queensland. Before his work on Undead he had only two film credits. In 2000 he scored the Spierig brothers’ thirteen-minute The Big Picture; in 2002 he won an Australian Screen Music Award for his score for Beck Cole’s sixteen-minute documentary The Creepy Crawleys.
1985 by Dan O’Bannon’s *Return of the Living Dead*. Indeed, the Spierigs’ *Undead* sustains a tradition that began as long ago as 1941, when Monogram Pictures released *King of the Zombies*, hardly a parody of what likely counts as the first-ever zombie movie – American Securities Corporation’s 1932 *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin and starring Bela Lugosi – but nevertheless a film that treats the zombie as a figure in whose presence laughing is at the very least permissible.

There are of course considerable differences between the zombies depicted, comically or otherwise, in the films from the 1930s and ’40s and those depicted in films from the late 1960s and onwards. The first group is related to documented actual practice in Haitian culture that involves persons who are not in fact dead but who for one reason or another – pharmacological, but often attributed to the voodoo religion – seem to be dead and who, upon being roused from their comatose states, act as slaves for their awakeners (Courlander 1960; Davis 1983; Niehaus 2005). The purely fictional second group, on the other hand, involves not just certifiably dead persons who for some quasi-scientific reason come back to life but also living persons who turn into zombies because they are infected (usually via a bite or some other exchange of bodily fluids) with what seems to be a zombie ‘virus’.

The traditional Haitian zombie is creepy for sure; it has no mind of its own, and its sole purpose is to do the bidding, malevolent or otherwise, of its master. But the modern zombie (as first depicted in George Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*) is in many ways far more frightening. In large part this is because the modern zombie has no master and thus is utterly beyond control; its behaviour is governed only by an apparently insatiable need to feed on the flesh or, in some films, the brains of living humans. The modern zombie is especially frightening, too, because it is virtually immune to whatever slings and arrows (or bullets and firebombs) might be used against it: holding to a ‘rule’ set out in *Night of the Living Dead*, in almost all the zombie films of the last forty years, the creatures are stoppable only if their brains – such as they might be – are physically destroyed. But perhaps the scariest thing about the modern zombie is the dazzling speed with which it spreads its condition among an otherwise normal population.

---

4 The international scope of these films, all made in their directors’ native or adopted countries, is worth noting. *Fido* is Canadian and *Shaun of the Dead* is British; *Dead & Breakfast, Army of Darkness*, and *Return of the Living Dead* are American; *Braindead* (renamed *Dead Alive* for its North American release) hails from New Zealand; the Spierig brothers were born in Germany but grew up in Australia, and their 2003 *Undead* – like the three zombie ‘shorts’ they made in 1995 while students at the Queensland College of Art – clearly counts as an Australian film.

5 *King of the Zombies* (Jean Yarbrough) is ostensibly a serious wartime film about espionage; its humor is considerable, but is conveyed only through the broadly comic reactions of actor Mantan Moreland to the zombies and other odd manifestations in the island mansion that is the plot’s main locale. A much more overtly funny zombie film is RKO’s 1945 *Zombies on Broadway* (Gordon Douglas), which starred Lugosi and the comedy team of Wally Brown and Alan Carney. As with most of Universal’s horror-film spoofs, *Zombies on Broadway* featured music by a composer who just a few years before had scored a quite serious film on the same theme. In this case the composer was Roy Webb, and the model for the parody was RKO’s 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourner).

6 Although Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (Image Ten) is generally considered to be the first modern zombie film, it should be noted that the creatures that menace the lone protagonist of Sidney Salkow’s 1965 *The Last Man on Earth* (American International) exhibit many similar behaviours. Identified as ‘ghouls’, the flesh-hungry titular characters in the Romero film apparently are resurrected because of an atmospheric disturbance caused by a falling satellite; described as having ‘vampire-like’ qualities, the nocturnal and blood-thirsty characters in the Salkow film are victims of a world-wide disease. It should be noted, too, that resurrected dead persons, although they seem to have no particular appetites, figure in two low-budget films from 1959, Edward L. Cahn’s *Invisible Invaders* (United Artists) and Edward Wood’s *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (William J. Reynolds); in both of these, the risen corpses are animated by means of deliberate actions taken by extraterrestrials.

7 Zombie films that feature brain eating include, but are hardly limited to, *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985), *Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O’Bannon, 1985), *Return of the Living Dead Part II* (Ken Wiederhorn, 1988), *Return of the Living Dead III* (Brian Yuzna, 1993), and *Dawn of the Dead* (Zak Snyder, 2004).
Although it has been stripped of personality, the traditional Haitian zombie nevertheless remains a human being who becomes what it is only through the deliberate act of a zombie master. In marked contrast, the no-longer-human modern zombie results not from willful action but simply from circumstances. It resembles its former self only in the most superficial of ways, and its role in the filmic narrative is actually insignificant. However horrific might be the individual modern zombie that hungrily sinks its teeth into the flesh of a still-human character, the real fright-producer here is not the individual zombie but the ever-growing collective to which it belongs. Unlike most other filmic monsters, the modern zombie is not a singular evil but a generic representative of an out-of-control situation; indeed, the modern filmic zombie seems to be, more than anything else, the embodiment of a nightmarish apocalyptic plague.

Likely it was the sudden rise of totalitarianism in the newly founded Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that at least in part inspired German director Fritz Lang’s 1926 Metropolis, a futuristic silent film (based on a 1924 novel by Lang’s wife, Thea von Harbou) whose plot centers around the revolt of a veritable army of zombie-like slaves against their taskmasters. Most definitely it was the perceived dangers of fascism in Germany that inspired H.G. Wells’s 1933 novel The Shape of Things to Come and its 1936 film adaptation, both of which portrayed in their post-war segments a population devastated by a “wandering sickness” whose most prominent symptom was a cessation of thinking. As for political motivations that might have fueled Romero’s Night of the Living Dead – released a few years after the potentially lethal ‘arms race’ between East and West had subsided but when boiling points were fast approaching not just for the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam conflict but also for America’s response to its entirely domestic Civil Rights movement – who can say?

Romero’s film anticipates by fifteen years the official recognition of the now widespread and still incurable ailment known as AIDS, and it anticipates by more than a quarter century the publication of Laurie Garret’s 1995 The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance. Hardly a scare-mongering hypothesis, Garret’s book was a well-researched account not just of the problems that immunologists were encountering with newly mutated vaccine-resistant viruses but also of the potentially deadly mix of such viruses and modern transportation/immigration patterns. One cannot help but notice that The Coming Plague, the scientific essence of which had circulated in the popular press for several years before the book’s actual publication, coincided neatly with Jackson’s Braindead and other representatives of the first substantial wave of comic films featuring the modern zombie. Likewise, one cannot help but notice that the second wave of comic zombie films, of which the Spierig brothers’ Undead is surely a part, coincides with almost daily media warnings about newly identified pandemic diseases and as yet undiscovered health threats related to global warming.

Perhaps that explains not just why filmic zombies are so prevalent today but also why so many of them are, like those in Undead, played for laughs: there is something to be said, after all, for gallows humor. But perhaps there are other reasons why zombies nowadays are, in fact, all around us.

‘Undecidability’

8 The adaptation was William Cameron Menzies’s Things to Come (1936, London Film Productions), notable in part for its score by Arthur Bliss.
Quite aside from the zombie presence in films both comic and serious, and in the film-inspired ‘zombie walks’ that since 2001 have become increasingly popular in cities around the world9, the concept of ‘zombie’ has lately appeared often in serious writings in such diverse fields as psychoanalysis, gender studies, sociology, medicine, computer science, international finance, philosophy, and literary theory (Bauman 1990; Moody 1994; Marcus 2004; Tanney 2004; England 2006; Connolly 2008; Staten 2008). Speculation as to why the zombie has in recent years not only displaced classic ‘Gothic’ monster types in popular entertainment but also figured so prominently in “discussions ranging from the philosophy of mind to computer discourse to the business press” (McIntosh and Leverette 2008: viii) is the subject of the largely film-oriented essays collected in Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead; the use of the zombie image in “a staggering variety of contexts” (ibid) and the important question of “why it operates as a kind of master signifier or trope for our time” (ibid) has prompted the solicitation of proposals for contributions to yet another anthology, tentatively titled Discourses of the Living Dead: The Proliferation of Zombie as Metaphor10.

Probably the resonance of ‘zombie as metaphor’ does not come immediately to mind as audience members burst into laughter at the spectacularly bloody sight, in Undead, of a zombie whose legs and spinal cord dance awkwardly after its torso has been blown off by repeated shotgun blasts, or of another zombie that divests itself of its face after the handle of a shovel whose blade has been driven through its skull gets caught on an overhead obstacle. Yet this resonance is worth considering. “The ubiquity of the metaphor suggests [not just] the zombie’s continued cultural currency” but also something deeper, write Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, something that might profitably be studied in order to discover “its usefulness as an ontic/hauntic object that speaks to some of the most puzzling elements of our sociohistorical moment, wherein many are trying to ascertain what lies in store for humanity after global capitalism – if anything” (Lauro and Embry 2008: 86).

Lauro and Embry probe the zombie metaphor in almost every imaginable way, but their focus is on the “materially real zombie” (ibid), by which they mean not actual flesh-hungry risen corpses but, rather, examples in the world around us of entities that seem to be one thing but it fact are another. They acknowledge (ibid) that their collaborative thinking owes a debt to zombie-related ideas expressed by Jacques Derrida in his 1994 Spectres de Marx; other writers on the zombie phenomenon find inspiration in earlier examples of Derrida’s work, especially his 1972 La Dissémination, in which the French literary theorist explored such concepts as the ‘stranger’ (the character in a drama who is obviously noticed but whose motivations are unknown), the ‘pharmakon’ (a chemical concoction that, depending on how it is used, might be either a cure for an ailment or a deadly poison), the ‘hymen’ (the interior part of the female anatomy that, depending upon its condition, represents either intimacy or a barrier to intimacy), and the ‘supplement’ (something that, depending on circumstances, either adds significantly to an existing situation or completely replaces it) (Bauman,1990: 143-6). Derrida’s influence on contemporary

---

9 The first ‘zombie walk,’ an informal parade involving persons costumed as modern zombies, took place in Sacramento, California (USA), in August 2001. Since then similar events have transpired — sometimes on an annual basis, and often related to a food drive for the homeless — in Toronto, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Vancouver, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Nottingham (UK), Seattle, and Warsaw (Poland). With more than 1,500 marchers, a zombie event in Brisbane (Australia) in May 2008 allegedly set a record (since broken) for number of participants.

10 Proposals for contributions to the ‘Zombie Anthology’ were first solicited on 23 August 2009 via a website hosted by the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of English (http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/33856). Accessed 24 September 2009.
zombie theory seems powerful, indeed. In a bold effort to condense the essence of virtually all of Derrida’s complex thinking into a single easily digestible capsule, Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblim early in their brief and richly illustrated 1997 *Introduction to Derrida* devote a full eight pages (17-24) to comic book-style zombie imagery.

It is of course only as an example of imagery – a symbol, an icon, a metaphor – that the zombie (in both its traditional Haitian and modern filmic incarnations) proves useful to Derrida and those who cite him. For Derrida, what the zombie image has in common with the other images he explored is a quality that he called, in French, *indécidabilité*. The word’s translation into English might at first glance seem simple, but complicating an easy translation is a host of subtle nuances. While the English ‘undecidability’ suggests an ambivalence that might be easily enough resolved if the attitude’s owner simply made up his or her mind, the French *indécidabilité* – as used by Derrida – suggests not a subjective point of view on the part of a phenomenon or its perceiver but, rather, an objective quality inherent in whatever it is that might be under consideration. The phenomenon possessed of *indécidabilité* blatantly defies the concept of bi-polar opposition that Derrida and others argued is the very foundation of modernist thought; in this respect, *indécidabilité* is an archetypal postmodern state of being, a characteristic of all in our culture that is neither this nor that.

Quite unlike animals and plants in the real world that are either dead or alive, the fictional zombie at the same time occupies both of these mutually exclusive categories. Far more so than its ‘undead’ horror-film mates as the vampire and the Frankenstein creature, the zombie, which is not an individual monstrosity but merely a generalised manifestation of a widespread condition, is an apt metaphor for much that troubles us in current times. It is likewise an apt metaphor for the Spierig brothers’ *Undead*, not because the film is about zombies but because so many of its components – including elements of its soundtrack – in terms of genre are, in the Derridian sense, ‘undecidable’.

**Over-the-top comedy, serious themes**

The title of *Undead* is not displayed until the film has rolled for a full eight minutes, a time long enough to provide audience members with audio messages aplenty that *Undead* will at least in some ways be a comedy but also long enough to suggest that whatever funny business ensues will be mixed with serious themes.

There is certainly nothing comic about the opening two sequences. The first depicts an outer-space explosion and is softly underscored by music whose minor-key melodic figure11 (Figure 1) suggests a situation that is at least potentially grim. The second sequence, featuring intense close-ups of René’s worried eyes and fidgeting fingers, depicts the emotionally burdened protagonist listening to a Savings & Loan official who informs her that, alas, she is responsible for the considerable debts incurred by the parents who bequeathed to their farm to her. The official’s gleefully sadistic monologue is not supported by underscore but is only punctuated, with unnerving effect, by erratic ‘zaps’ from faulty overhead lighting fixtures. If the brief third sequence suggests comedy, it is only because of the actor’s lecherous tone of

---

11 Cast in the ‘dark’ key of C minor, the slow-moving figure comprises just four notes: b–c’ quavers rising to a lightly accented e-flat’ crotchet that falls off, sigh-like, to d’. In later iterations, this opening melodic figure is typically followed by crotchet pairs (eg c’-b, a-flat-g) that descend, sigh-like, by half steps.
voice and his ‘double take’ at the sight of a bull being led down the street past Berkeley’s butcher shop; like the preceding sequence unaccompanied by music, on the surface this twenty-second scene does nothing more than show a young man telling someone via mobile phone about “a doll” who seems to him, deliciously, like “untouched country”.

Merely hinted at verbally and visually in the just-described short sequence, the comedy of Undead is made overt – primarily by means of Bradley’s music – in what comes next. Set in the office of a charter air service and accompanied by repeated fragments of a major-key melody\(^\text{12}\) (Figure 2) that will soon enough symbolise all that is ostensibly ‘pleasant’ about the town of Berkeley, the film’s fourth sequence (starting at 2:29) first shows an inconsequential character in inconsequential telephone conversation with a potential client. At the precise moment that the hitherto roving camera comes to rest on the cover of a book titled How to Survive Fatherhood, the underscore – thus far presented by solo flute and then by warm strings – shifts to solo bassoon, an instrument that has long been labeled “the clown of the orchestra”\(^\text{13}\). Who is reading the book and how his attitudes toward fatherhood might relate to the film’s plot still remain a mystery, but both the jocular nature of the new melodic fragment\(^\text{14}\) (Figure 3) and its assigned instrument unambiguously identify the character as comic.

The next sequence, like the one that depicted the young man on the mobile phone, suggests comedy only through its acting and similarly functions as a sort of buffer

---

\(^{12}\) Set in the ‘bright’ key of E major and in the ‘simple’ meter of 4/4, the melody fragments start with crotchet iterations of the pitches e’, b, f-sharp’, and a; the second measure begins with quavers on the pitches g-sharp’– a’– g-sharp’– e’ and closes, in a half cadence, with crotchet iterations of f-sharp’ and b’

\(^{13}\) This exact phrase comes from Ebenezer Prout’s 1899 The Orchestra, but suggestions that the solo bassoon is especially well-suited for comical effects—perhaps because its low-register pitches to an extent sound flatulent—appear as early as 1843 in Hector Berlioz’s Grand traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes. For more on the comical use of the bassoon and various other instruments, see Mera (2002).

\(^{14}\) This second fragment, like the first, is in E major. It starts with three staccato crotchets (E’– G-sharp’– B’) that outline the E-major triad. After a quaver rest, it continues with quavers on E, D-sharp, E, B’, G-sharp’, and C-sharp before settling, in another half cadence, on a dotted crotchet B’.
between the film’s two genres. It shows the female deputy constable, new to the job, receiving advice from a hard-edged woman who apparently has just vacated the position. The lighting is stark; the language, coming entirely from the advice-giver, is harsh and blunt; lightly accompanied by innocuous pop music emanating diegetically from some distant radio, the hostile monologue is punctuated – in a way that recalls the electrical noises of the scene in the Savings & Loan office – by loud slams that resonate ominously in the locker room’s cold acoustic environment. If there is anything here to provoke a laugh, it is only the new employee’s wide-open eyes.

Indeed, one might start to wonder if focus on characters’ eyes is a motif in Undead, a visual device (akin to the emphasis of such isolated sounds as those just described) by means of which the directors emphasise comedy or (more often) its opposite in scenes that fall easily into one pigeonhole or the other and also, intriguingly, remind audience members that most of the film’s scenes, genre-wise, are not what at first glance they might seem to be. In any case, whereas the female deputy’s brown eyes provide the sole hint of comedy in the locker-room sequence, René’s pale blue-grey eyes – as profoundly sad as any ‘windows of the soul’ can be – express the consistent essence of the next sequence far more eloquently than does the barely audible underscore of bleak harmonies and occasional melodic hints (Figure 4) of what is to come.

After this almost tear-provokingly serious sequence, during which a shame-laden René speaks with her grandmother over a pay phone about her plan to drive to “the city” with “that agent guy,” the next sequence shows René meeting up with the lecherous figure depicted earlier. A few seconds later the camera pans from the automobile of the “agent guy” to a large sign that says “Welcome to Berkeley,” whereupon the extra-diegetic orchestra (at 5:47) strikes up a full-voiced and uninterrupted version of the cheery tune that in the air-service scene was only hinted at. Montage-like imagery depicts people shopping, playing cricket, and in other ways going about their normal business. Soon enough the sky is filled with what look to be meteorites, the sight of which is invariably marked with shimmery high-register vibraphone sonorities and darkly quivering low-register clarinet figures laid over the continuing up-beat ‘Berkeley’ melody. Accompanied by the minor-key music first alluded to in the ‘outer-space’ opening sequence, meteorites blow gaping holes in the midsections of several Berkeley residents. Only after an eviscerated ‘little old lady’ is shown rising to her feet and then ripping the head off an onlooker does the film’s garishly lettered title appear, and by this time (ca. 8:00) it seems clear that Undead – despite the perpetual gut-wrenching look in René’s eyes – has entered the realm of comic-book fantasy.

---

15 Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations attributes the phrase to a 1606 English translation of essays by the late 16th Century French writer Guillaume de Salluste; the idea of eyes being the ‘windows of the soul’ is likely better known through its use by Shakespeare in Act V of King Richard III.

16 Set in a triple meter (12/8), the bit of melody consists of a dotted crotchet B tied to a quaver on the same pitch followed by quavers on B-flat and G-flat; the triplet figure resolves to a dotted breve A. In the film this motif often accompanies scenes of zombies fleeing, and it is probably just coincidence that it bears a resemblance in both rhythm and pitch contour to the chorus of the song ‘Food, Glorious Food’ from Lionel Bart’s 1960 musical Oliver!

17 The music at this point involves both of the minor-key phrases shown in Figure 1 and described in footnote 11.
The film’s comic-book quality by this time seems clear, yet again and again audience members are led to think – even if just for a moment – that what is transpiring might be not just a ‘serious’ zombie story but a serious story, period.

Mentioned above has been the narrative’s big moment of transition, midway through the film, when the six principal characters discover a giant wall that blocks their escape not just from marauding zombies but also, in effect, from one of those “rural towns and eccentric communities” that are “the breeding grounds of the Gothic” in Australian cinema (Rayner, 2000: 27). But the idea of hopeless entrapment, explicitly articulated in this scene, has already come up several times before. The theme is certainly hinted at early in the film in the two sequences that focus on René, the first showing her beset by electrical noise as she is reminded of her onerous and apparently inescapable debts, the second showing her telling her distant grandmother of her need to get away from Berkeley as soon as possible while an empty-sounding orchestral accompaniment quietly amplifies her sense of isolation. Quite overtly, the theme of entrapment is voiced (at 27:55) as the sextet takes shelter in an underground bunker.

By this time the six characters (actually, three pairs of characters) have been clearly delineated. Matched with sad but still sexy René is Marion, the taciturn and superlatively macho proprietor of a gun and fishing supply store; matched with deputy constable Molly is her officious and bumbling superior officer; matched with Wayne (the young man who early in the film was shown reading the book on fatherhood) is his very pregnant wife Sallyanne. Between Sallyanne and René there is unresolved business that momentarily takes precedent over threats from zombies; for several years Sallyanne had been victorious in Berkeley’s annual beauty pageant, and only recently was she forced – because of her pregnancy – to yield her ‘Catch of the Day’ crown to the more shapely and perhaps more cosmopolitan-minded René. When the zombie attacks have momentarily lulled, and when the hitherto churning underscore appropriately takes a rest, Sallyanne lashes out at her rival. Fairly screaming in rage, she asks: “How does it feel, René? Huh? How does it feel? How does it feel to be trapped in this town with the rest of us?” More than twenty minutes later, after spectacular battling with flesh-hungry zombies, Marion offers his soft-spoken yet telling observation that in fact “we’re all fenced in”. And then the film lurches, at full throttle, into science-fiction mode.

Especially after this abrupt shift of gears, Undead’s many allusions to ‘otherworldliness’ are musically limned most often by pairs of chords whose topmost voices descend by half steps; whereas the prominent half-step motifs heard early in the film (see Figure 1) occurred as parts of ongoing melodies and were harmonised in conventional fashion to suggest a firm rooting in a minor key, in the film’s second half these same motifs figure into sustained polytonal harmonies whose ‘progression’ seems quite deliberately aimless. The science-fiction portion of the film is marked as well by slowly rising harp arpeggios, by ostinato patterns sounded by shimmering glockenspiel-vibraphone combinations, and by dramatically revelatory ‘stinger’ chords.

Although the film’s plot after the turning point is difficult to follow, there is something almost reassuring about the accompanying music, the affective vocabulary of which had been established in the 1950s not just with a raft of American science-fiction films but also – significantly – with the television series
called *The Twilight Zone*. Just as Vivian Sobchack observed that “what is notable about most SF film music is its lack of notability” (1993: 208), what is most remarkable about the generally ‘creepy’ underscore for the second half of *Undead* is its loyalty to tradition. Indeed, one notices the underscore only when it boldly breaks with tradition for the sake of supporting the occasional moments when the film’s other narrative – the zombie story – intrudes upon the increasingly complex science-fiction tale.

Conclusions

To make a long and utterly preposterous story short, it turns out that Berkeley’s ‘zombie problem’ was simply an unfortunate side effect of examinations of Berkeley residents by extraterrestrials who, upon their departure from Earth, sincerely believe that whatever ‘problems’ they created have been solved. Alas, the antidote for zombification offered by the extraterrestrials proves to be only temporary.

The epilogue is grim, and made all the more so not just by extra-diegetic orchestral music that is anything but comic but also by ear-catching sound effects of the sort that French film theorist Raymond Bellour called “arbitrary noise” (1975: 23–24). Earlier, when Marion rescues a helpless and terrified René from the film’s first large-scale zombie attack, his heroic entrance is marked by such “arbitrary noise” as the exaggeratedly reverberant clicks of his pump shotgun and the loud tinkle of his spent cartridges falling, in slow motion, to the pavement; in the epilogue, the “arbitrary noise” comes mostly from the sharp spurs on René’s boots.

Peter Spierig’s use of “arbitrary noise” in the rescue sequence and in the epilogue is especially telling, for by the end of the film the roles of the two main characters have for all intents and purposes been reversed. Emphasising the film’s pervasive idea of entrapment and also playing up another quintessentially Australian theme, that of the “strong assertive woman verging... on the larrikin” in opposition to a male character who is “recessive... and doomed to failure” (Dermody and Jacka 1988: 33), the final scene shows a heavily armed René standing guard (on the farm of which she is now proudly the owner) over a fenced-in herd of hungry zombies that includes whatever remains of Marion. Faced with this disturbing image of internment, the audience member might need to struggle to recall that what led up to it was a peculiar mixture of straightforward science-fiction and over-the-top zombie-based comedy.

One hesitates to say that *Undead* is a ‘serious’ film. Yet this essentially comic film does have serious undertones, and many of these undertones are transmitted by means of aural signals. It is emblematic of the soundtrack’s cleverness that at least some of these dark-toned signals resonate subtly yet powerfully in sequences when the obvious elements of action, imagery, and dialogue are played for laughs. While Cliff Bradley’s score enables the film to alternate smoothly between modes of comedy and its opposite, Peter Spierig’s sound design often allows the film to be both comic and serious at the same time. And it is during these ‘in-between’

---

18 Produced by and with most of its episodes written by Rod Serling, *The Twilight Zone* aired on the CBS network from 1959 until 1964. The music for the very first *Twilight Zone* episode was by Bernard Herrmann, who in 1951 helped establish science-fiction film’s musical conventions with his score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise).

19 Bellour distinguishes between relatively artificial “arbitrary noise” and quasi-realistic “motivated noise”, the latter so called because it is motivated, or necessitated, by the scenic circumstances. His terminology is perhaps unfortunate, because “arbitrary noise” results not from chance but from deliberate decisions on the part of the filmmaker.
moments, destablised largely by their sonic content, that Undead is most provocatively ‘undecidable’.

Bibliography

NUMINOUS AMBIENCE:
Spirituality, Dreamtimes and Fantastic Aboriginality

Philip Hayward

Abstract

Peter Weir’s apocalyptic thriller The Last Wave (1977) drew on aspects of Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs to construct a highly atmospheric fantasy of indigenous ‘otherness’ enacted in contemporary Sydney. This article analyses the film’s score and sound design and, in particular, the manner in which it creates sonic ambiances and dramatic emphases within the narrative. The article commences with discussion of the Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime (and how this has been interpreted by Western writers) and then proceeds to consider how Aboriginality has been represented in film scores, with particular emphasis on the role of the iconic Aboriginal didjeridu. Following a consideration of how US popular fictional texts (such as Philip Kaufman’s 1983 film The Right Stuff) have engaged with aspects of indigenous Australian spirituality, the main body of the article looks at the ways that score and sound combine in particular moments in The Last Wave, the nature of the musical sounds (and cultural associations) deployed and the film’s ‘sonic conclusion’.

Keywords
Aboriginality, Dreamtime, Peter Weir, numinosity, ambience

Introduction

Australian filmmakers have represented Aborigines (and Torres Strait Islanders) on screen since the earliest days of the medium, initially in short ethnographic/travel films and subsequently in feature-length productions. Notable examples of the latter include Charles Chauvel’s Uncivilised (1936) and Jedda (1955), Australian cinema ‘revival’ films such as Walkabout (Nick Roeg, 1971) and Storm Boy (Henri Safran, 1976), and recent features such as Yolngu Boy (Stephen Johnson, 2001), Rabbit-Proof Fence (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and Ten Canoes (Rolf de Heer, 2006). As might be expected, these films are imbued by ideologies that mirror the social-political zeitgeist of the periods they were produced in and the variously affirmative and dissenting agendas and imaginations of their authors. Like any representation, the films reveal as much about the imagination of Australia’s colonisers as they do of

---

1 The name of the instrument is spelled variously, including the previously more common ‘didgeridoo’. The usage here reflects an Australian ethnomusicological convention established by authors associated with the journal Perfect Beat in the late 1990s.
2 See Kibby (2005) for an insightful discussion of sound and music in the film.
3 See Krausz (2003) for a detailed overview of Australian cinema’s representation of Aboriginality.
actual Aboriginal cultures and communities and the manner in which they inhabit the spaces of the Australian continent. (Australian) Aboriginality has also registered an occasional presence in Hollywood and global cinema, where it has been posed as an ultimate ‘other’ to the rational and increasingly technologised West in films such as *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983), *Where the Green Ants Dream* (Werner Herzog, 1985) and *Until the End of the World* (Wim Wenders, 1991).

Dreamtime

Central to the image of Aboriginality as pre-modern ‘other’ is an interpretation of Aboriginal concepts of spirituality and attachment to nature. The latter concepts are, of course, highly complex: ‘nature’ being a concept of the flora and fauna as an integrated entity within a broader geo-material one; and ‘spirituality’ being a broad catch-all term for (the imagination of and engagement with) a transcendent reality and power. Perhaps the best-known aspect of Aboriginal spirituality is that of its Dreamtime. This term refers to Aboriginal mythologies of creation and the earliest period of human life (when interaction with powerful entities shaped landscape, the biomass and human destiny). The concept first appeared in the work of late 19th Century anthropologists Gillen and Spencer and reflected their engagement with the Central Australian Arrente people and their common belief that the remote past was (an) *alcheringa* – a state that they understood and translated as “dreamtimes, in which their mythic ancestors lived” (Dean, 1996: 12). Current perceptions of this state as a core pan-Aboriginal concept appear to largely derive from the research of Anglican clergyman and anthropologist A.P Elkin, particularly as asserted in his 1969 article ‘Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy’. As critics such as Dean have identified, while Elkin’s particular characterisation of the Dreamtime may have accurately represented the cosmology of the Northern Territory Murinbata clan (at least at the time he researched them) there are a wider variety of inflections and perceptions of historical consciousness across different Australian Aboriginal societies than Elkin’s work suggests. Drawing on a range of sources, Dean has identified a set of core spiritual perceptions to traditional Aboriginal societies:

There is no sharp distinction between the sacred and secular, since the spirit world and human world interpenetrate. All aspects of the Aboriginal environment are affected by the power of spirits. The very land itself is a kind of ‘church’; it is a kind of theophany where the land contains the essence of the Ancestors, and is the work of the Ancestors. The whole land is a religious sanctuary, with special regions throughout it which have acquired special sacred status. The Aborigines regard themselves, whether as individuals, groups, categories, sexes or genetic stock, to be in mystic communion, via the sacred spaces, with certain totemic beings... They are intimately connected with their whole environment which is pervaded by the supernatural, the result being that their experience of the whole environment is charged with numinous ambience. (1996: 2)

Within this context, Dean identifies common ‘Dreamtime’ beliefs as expressive of immutable values, an aspect that Yanyuwa clan member Harvey Mussolini has expressed in the following terms:

---

4 There is also a growing body of work by indigenous filmmakers that reflect rather differently on Australia, Aboriginal experiences and settler society, Ivan Sen’s 2002 feature *Beneath Clouds*, Rachel Perkins’ features *Radiance* (1998) and *One Night the Moon* (2001) and Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah* (2009) being notable examples.

5 The Yanyuwa people inhabit the area in the southwest of the Gulf of Carpentaria.
Dreaming is a really big thing for Aboriginal people. In our language, Yanuwa, we call the Dreaming Yijan. The Dreamings made our Law or narnu-Yuwa. This Law is the way we live, or rules. This Law is our ceremonies, our songs, our stories; all of these things came from the Dreaming. One thing that I can tell you though is that our Law is not like European Law which is always changing – new government, new laws; but our Law cannot change, we did not make it. The Law was made by the Dreamings many, many years ago and given to our ancestors and they gave it to us. (quoted in Hardison, 2005: 6)

A number of aspects of Aboriginal cosmology have been co-opted into Western New Age beliefs where they have been misrepresented and de-localised as a resource for transnational cultures. As Grossinger has expressed it, a perception developed in some New Age circles in the 1980s that Aborigines are not only ‘dreaming’ their olden legend-time: they are dreaming all of nature. They are maintaining the sacred hearths for all of us... Their Dream Time is a universal human experience that has become totally unconscious and vestigial in the rest of humanity. (Grossinger, 1986: 117)

As subsequent sections of this article discuss, this constitutes a significant appropriation of indigenous beliefs for western ends.

In mainstream cinema, uses of music and sound have been particularly prominent as signifiers of difference in films that have attempted to represent mystic and, indeed, para-normal Aboriginality[6] and its relation to (very specific white interpretations of) the Dreamtime. The role of music in cinematic representations of Aborigines was first characterised by Kibby and Neuenfeldt (1998) in a chapter that remains a seminal reference point for the field. As the authors demonstrate, the didjeridu, an instrument traditionally confined to Aboriginal groups in the far north of Australia, has become a ubiquitous audio marker of Aboriginality (or simply of the Australian bush itself) either through its actual use or through the imitation of aspects of its timbre and pitch by other instruments (deployed primarily to produce drones and rumbles). Indeed, as the editors of a volume addressed to the various musical and cultural applications of the didjeridu asserted, it constitutes:

- a distinctive instrument, icon and sound
- a nexus of social relationships
- a way of engaging with wider theoretical issues such as appropriation, globalisation and commodification. (Hayward and Neuenfeldt, 1997: 9)[7]

Along with the didjeridu, Aboriginal songs, often accompanied by clap-sticks, provide further obvious audio markers of exotic Aboriginality that composers and sound designers can draw on or directly sample into their mixes.

This article commences with a discussion of the representation of mystic Aboriginality in two prominent American fiction texts that exploit the archetypal New

---

[6] See, for instance, Grossinger’s statement that: “Cut off from the rest of the species for anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 years, they have perhaps developed unique parapsychological (and paraphysical) abilities” (1986: 117).

[7] The authors add that it also (and in their words “most importantly”) comprises a “local and global product and process” in active development (ibid).
Age perception discussed above; and then rewinds chronologically to a film only referred to briefly by Kibby and Neuenfeldt, Peter Weir’s 1977 feature *The Last Wave*. Due to the fantastic nature of its scenario, the film has often been overlooked by critics concerned to address Australian cinema’s engagement with issues of Aboriginal rights, living circumstances and politics. Despite this, the film merits attention as a rich audio-visual fantasy of Aboriginal otherness. It is marked by an unease about settler history and its relation to the deep histories and Dreamtimes of the continent, a relation in which Aboriginality spiritual ‘otherness’ provides an apocalyptic conclusion to white settler alienation rather than a pathway to spiritual rapture.

**American Imagination**

The first significant Hollywood representation of Australian Aboriginal culture occurred in 1983 in Philip Kaufman’s feature *The Right Stuff*. Adapted from Tom Wolfe’s eponymous 1979 publication, the film relates the story of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s development of manned space flight, focusing on the character and achievements of its pilots. Kaufman’s screenplay and direction emphasised a spiritual – and often mystical – aspect to its narrative that is far more understated in Wolfe’s original book. Suitably in this regard, the film begins with a piece of modern folklore, a story of there being a demon who lives on the sound barrier, intent on keeping humans at bay. After a prologue that shows this demon being (figuratively) conquered by test pilot Chuck Yeager (played by Sam Shepard), as he breaks the sound barrier in a sub-orbital test-plane, the film commences on its main narrative of the early astronaut program. The film scooped honours for soundtrack at the 1984 Academy Awards ceremonies, securing Best Music and Original Score awards for composer Bill Conti and his collaborators and Best Sound Effects Editing and Best Sound for its audio personnel. But while Conti’s orchestral score (performed by the London Symphony Orchestra), accompanied many of the film’s most dramatic flight scenes, one of its most effective sequences combines more subtle underscore and sound elements specific to its scenario.

The scene in question involves NASA trainee astronaut ‘Gordo’ Cooper (Dennis Quaid) traveling to an satellite tracking station in the Australian outback, at Muchea, north of Perth, to communicate with astronaut John Glenn (Ed Harris) as he passes over on his – and the Americans’ – first manned orbit of the planet. The representation of this (actual) event commences with Cooper driving up to the station with an Australian colleague (played by Anthony Wallis). The scene’s Australianness is flagged through the two duetting on a chorus of the iconic Australian bush ballad ‘Waltzing Matilda’ (which Cooper cheekily confides to his driver he thought was written by [early US country music icon] Hank Williams). Outside the small building Cooper encounters a group of Aborigines and converses with a young man (played by Aboriginal performer David Gulpilil) who asks Cooper what he’s doing there. After hearing of the American orbiting the planet he replies, “You fellas do that too?” and identifies a tribal elder sitting by a rock as both capable of astral navigation and able to help the astronauts. This interaction is complemented in the soundtrack by a brief didjeridu sample followed by an unsettling electronic didjeridu-like motif as the sun sets. These tones continue as the scene cuts to the rocket launch pad at Cape

---

8 Which derived substantial inspiration from Gustav Holst’s ‘The Planets’ (1914-16) and Tchaikovsky’s ‘Violin Concerto in D Major’ (1878).
9 An event that occurred in May 1963.
10 Possibly a garbled reference, since Jimmie Rodgers recorded a hit version of the song in 1959.
Canaveral, giving a sense of foreboding. After the countdown and take-off, the score provides more triumphant, almost processional orchestral passages, underscoring the achievement of orbital flight and the impressive vistas Glenn witnesses. As Glenn’s capsule orbits into night the scene cuts back to Muchea, where the Aborigines’ campfire crackles loudly. Glenn then talks to Cooper on the radio as he crosses the West Australian coast and flies on to dawn again (heralded by a rousing horn motif). At this point the mood switches: cutting back to the quiet business of mission control interrupted when, a loud bleeping signal alerts the ground crew that there is a problem with the capsule’s heat shield. The mission controllers have no clear answer to the problem and tension immediately rises, accompanied by an unsettling drone at the rear of the mix.

The narrative then cuts back to the campfire, which is now roaring. Gulpilil’s character begins dancing, accompanied by a short rhythmic didjeridu motif and clap-sticks (with the former soon morphing into an orchestral tone) and a Yolngu chant (suggesting an incantation), with animal-like cries adding atmospheric intensity. The camera shows bright embers flying up from the fire into the night sky. Cutting to the capsule, Glenn (who is, as yet, unaware of his technical problems) sees a cloud of embers encircling his craft and responds with glee, describing them as like fireflies and wondering whether they can be alive. A series of further cuts between the capsule and campfire emphasise the connection between the Aboriginal dance and song, the embers from their fire and the sparkling cloud that enmeshes the spaceship. As the film moves on to show Glenn’s fiery re-entry and subsequent tickertape parade through Manhattan, the sense of spiritual aid, of an unspoken magical gift from the pre-Modern to the rocket age, further adds to the film’s mythic celebration of America’s grand enterprise. Or, as Grossinger (1986) has less ambivalently embellished it, having “travelled by rocket back into the Dream Time, and, in the absence of his heat shield, (Glenn) is protected by Aboriginal shamans sitting before their fires” (116-7). Just as the term ‘shamans’ is inappropriate to Aboriginal culture, so is the performance. Gulpilil’s dance and the chant are Yolngu clan properties and the didjeridu is a traditional instrument of Yolngu and adjacent clans from northern ‘Top End’ Australia – lands and cultures far from the traditional lands of the Noongar clan of Australian’s south west coast where the action takes place.

Although there is no evidence of a direct link between the texts, a second significant American mythologisation of Aboriginal mysticism – based on similar misrepresentations – followed in 1990 in the form of Marlo Morgan’s book Mutant Message Down Under,11 a work that purported to recount the author’s meeting with nomadic central Australian Aborigines. Accompanying them on a three month long trek, she learns skills of telepathy and transformation, becomes acquainted with stories from the deep Dreamtime, attends didjeridu performances and – in a spirit of reciprocality – teaches the group the popular US spoke line dance12 ‘Cotton Eyed Joe’, waltzing and square dancing. The experience (of the former, rather than the latter) transforms her perceptions and she returns to western culture with an important ‘mutant’ message for the spiritual health of mankind. Her fanciful observations on the particular powers of the didjeridu (in a chapter entitled ‘Medicine and Music’) are, as Neuenfeldt identifies, riddled with “inaccuracies and inanities” that have the overall effect of producing a “hyper-spectacularisation and hyper-spiritualisation of Aboriginal culture” that “overwhelms the genocide and ethnocide

---

11 Initially published under the title Walkabout Woman: Messenger for a Vanishing Tribe but best known by its subsequent title.
12 A dance in which lines of dancers enact a collective motion akin to a wheel turning around when viewed from above.
experienced by many Aboriginal people in the past” and “diminished life chances in the present” (1998: 90) in favour of a fantastic exoticism.

First self-published in 1990, as a supposedly authentic narrative, and promoted by the author on lecture tours across the US in early 1990s, Morgan built a cult following and the book was republished by Harper Collins in 1994 with a substantial advance to its author. The high profile publicity accruing to this edition rekindled accusations of its fictitiousness that culminated in the Dumbartung Aboriginal Organisation publishing a comprehensive refutation in 1995. Key to their critique was the manner in which Morgan provides a mishmash of New Age garblings of North American First Nations beliefs and secondarily sourced information about Aboriginal culture that mixes traditional ‘Top End’ (Northern Territory) references (such as the didjeridu being performed as a traditional instrument) with very different central Australian Aboriginal customs (which, for instance, do not include use of the instrument).

News of Morgan selling the film rights for her book to United Artists for just under two million dollars in 1995 prompted a delegation of senior Aboriginal elders to visit Hollywood to protest against the projected film and to continue their denunciation of the book. In a statement issued as part of a series of press releases referred to as the Bounuh Wongee (‘message stick’) series, Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation leader Robert Eggington referred to Morgan’s book as a ‘New Age Masquerade of Imperialism’ and identified it as imbued with a more deep-seated attempt to constrain, desecrate and exploit indigenous culture, arguing that,

Whilst Governments and their instrumentalities such as tourism commissions promote Aboriginal culture overseas to attract international tourist and business dollars our people suffer from the denigration of loss of culture and spiritual growth and identity. (ibid)

Eggington goes on to castigate Morgan’s book as a “New-age infringement into indigenous spirituality and cultures” that “creates the belief that all people through evolutionary change have a rightful claim of ownership to the knowledge and sacredness of indigenous cultures” and identifies his critique as part of the “the world’s indigenous peoples’ struggle against spiritual colonization” (ibid).

Eggington’s delegation met with United Artists’ representatives, staged a successful media conference and participated in a meeting arranged by actor and social activist Steven Seagal during which a phone conference with Morgan was held in which she apologised, retracted and undertook to publish and acknowledge the same. While the publicity resulted in United Artists withdrawing their production plans, Morgan subsequently reneged on her promises and continued touring to promote her book, amid growing publicity, with the film project being acquired by a film company entitled Next Wave films. While developed by Barbara Boyle and Michael Taylor and scripted by Gerald DiPego in 1997, the project never went into production.¹⁴ As a fantasy of Aboriginal spirituality in which indigenous powers and prophecies were introduced to a white westerner, Morgan’s book invites comparison to the earlier

¹³ The producer/writer team responsible for the 1996 feature film *Phenomenon*, directed by John Turteltaub, that has a similar mystical/New Age/paranormal slant.

¹⁴ A script for the film is identified in the Online Archive of California’s Haskell Wexler Collection of Scripts for Television and Motion Pictures, 1967-1996 (listed as Box 31). While the catalogue credits this as written by Morgan, lack of any mention of Morgan having developed her own script suggests that this is DiPego’s script. See catalogue reference at: http://content.cdlib.org - accessed October 2008.
One of the salient points about the historical vignette provided above is that the space of recent Australian cinema is one in which wilder imaginations of Aboriginality have been largely absent, as Australian settler society belatedly attempts to redress past injustices and misrepresentations and struggles to comprehend indigenous cultures. *The Last Wave* is significant since its imagination of Aboriginal mythology and connections to mystic prophetic powers emanates from a moment of Australian cinema (and social) history when attitudes towards Aboriginal history and rights were in transition. Like Morgan’s book, the film also attracted criticism and protest from Aboriginal rights groups during its production on the grounds of its misrepresentation of an embattled section of the Australian community who had only succeeded in being granted citizenship by a national referendum in 1967 and were still subject to considerable institutional and informal racism and harassment. But unlike Morgan’s book, the controversy accruing to the film was less sustained and acute, reflecting its nature as an entirely fictional work; its employment of Aboriginal actors and a cultural consultant (Lance Bennett, of the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation); and – it must be said – the less-organised and less well facilitated Aboriginal activist network existing at the time of its production. Such a film would be unlikely to made in contemporary Australia and *The Last Wave* thereby represents a period in which ‘politically correct’ sensibilities were still in their infancy (and is all the more revealing for that).

*The Last Wave*

*The Last Wave* was written and directed by (then) emerging filmmaker Peter Weir and followed his first feature, the cult hit *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) (henceforth *Cars*) and the more widely popular *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) (henceforth *Picnic*). These films presented two very different representations of non-urban Australia, its otherness and inhospitality to urban white settler culture. *Cars* is an exercise in what has been termed ‘Outback Gothic’, presenting non-urban Australia as a place of threat, manifest in its landscapes and the uncivil population that inhabits it. The ‘Paris’ in question, a small country town,15 is dominated by wreckers16 who cause car crashes in order to plunder the vehicles and their contents, often killing their (urban) drivers and passengers in the process. The threat here is of white settler society ‘gone feral’ and the discordant hurdy-gurdy waltz that welcomes the film’s chief protagonist to town and the harsh growling tones of revved up custom cars underline the menace of their drivers and the town’s general support culture.17 *Picnic*, by contrast, offers a more mystical, unseen threat, that of the film’s central location, the monolithic ‘Hanging Rock’ that its genteel senior high school girls visit on a summer picnic, only to disappear, vanishing into a brooding, ancient materiality. The film’s soundtrack is significantly different to its predecessor, blending deep almost inaudible tones that suggest menace, with prominent environmental atmos, well-known classical pieces (signifying the girls’ cultured background) and atmospheric nai (Romanian pan flute) melodies (performed by Gheorghe Zamfir), which evokes a seductive, mystical otherness appropriate to the often trance-like nature of the film.18

---

15 Actually the rural New South Wales town of Sofala.
16 Like the coastal ship-wrecking communities of the settler population’s ‘home country’, the United Kingdom. See Bathurst (2005) for a survey.
18 For an overview of Peter Weir’s oeuvre and its uses of sound and music see Johnson and Poole (1998).
In précis, *The Last Wave*’s plot involves a lawyer named David Burton (played by Richard Chamberlain) who represents a group of Aborigines he suspects of having murdered a member of their clan as part of a traditional law punishment. During this engagement he experiences increasingly vivid premonitions in dreams and begins to associate these with his real-life involvement in the case. Bizarre meteorological events convince him that traumatic events are about to unfold. After realising that he is implicated within a spiritual narrative created in the distant Dreamtime – and, indeed anointed as the agent of a divine power he can barely imagine – he finds himself in combat with the clan’s ‘shaman’ deep underground. While he emerges triumphant he realises that his victory is in vain as he sees a giant wave surging towards the city.

In interviews in the mid-late 1980s Weir characterised *The Last Wave* as having being inspired by his interests in mystic writers such as Carl Jung and Carlos Castaneda and in the forgotten events, races and beliefs suggested by the writings of pseudo-historians Immanuel Velikovsky and Erich von Däniken. Reflecting the latter in particular, early sketches of the film’s narrative included ancient Australian indigenes pulling rafts across the continent. The film represents a synthesis of these western pseudo-historical fantasies and an interest in actual Aboriginal culture that Weir has identified as having been kindled by meeting young Yolngu performer David Gulpilil (who also starred in *Walkabout* and appeared in *The Right Stuff*) in 1973. As he later recounted:

*He made me realize that everything I had been taught in school about the Aborigines was total hogwash. Through long conversations with him, I realized the absurdity of the history books, which teach that the Aborigines were a kind of Stone Age people in the dawn of time, nomadic, without any culture of significant or enduring qualities, that they collapsed in contact with a more advanced, superior, and complex culture. Talking with David, I realized the Aborigine culture was very much alive, if underground, so to speak. It was simply a different culture, and we had been looking at it with our own definition of culture. The Aborigines use the same word, culture, to mean something far richer than what we have come to mean by it. Here was a most interesting case where we had lost something since contact with the Aborigines – something they still had. They lost something too – the land and a lot of tribes.* (McGilligan, 1986: online)

Weir and co-writers Tony Morphett and Petru Popescu channeled these elements into a scenario thatrevolved around a fictional ‘lost tribe’ who inhabited the location of present-day Sydney in the pre-colonial period. This fabrication of an Aboriginal identity was, in itself, a problematic project and was one that Weir negotiated with Aboriginal Groote Island elder Nandjiwarra Amagula, who played the character Charlie in the film and acted as a key advisor on the limits of viable cultural appropriation. As Weir later revealed, while Amagula “accepted the principle of recreating a lost Sydney tribe and their symbols, and tokens” that was key to the film’s script, he unequivocally vetoed Weir’s request to use any actual Aboriginal symbols, and the director employed the film’s art director Goran Warff to create a wholly fictional set of motifs that Amagula approved (Rayner, 2003: 91).

---

Weir has described the plot and themes of *The Last Wave* as initially inspired by a sense of premonition he had upon finding an artefact in the ruins of an ancient city in Tunisia. After considering how an archetypally rational westerner might grapple with such an impulse he discussed the conflict with Gulpilil and “gradually the forces began to come together” *(ibid)* and (inspired by Velikovsky and Däniken) developed the film’s plot and script (Kass, 1979). As Grossinger has succinctly summarised, the final product was

*a movie in which charismatic Aboriginal actors... bring their voodoo and interior visioning to the cities... Here the Dreaming is portrayed not as decorative myth but a source of real energy, from beyond the known forces of science, with the capacity to act geologically and meteorologically and to return the land to its aboriginal state.* (1986: 116)

Despite severe budgetary constraints impacting on the realisation of the project,²⁰ the film was favourably received by critics and received Australian Film Institute Awards for Best Achievement in Sound (awarded to the team of Don Connolly, Greg Bell and Phil Judd) and Cinematography (to Russell Boyd). The film also garnered international recognition, receiving a special jury award at the Avoriaz Fantastic Film Festival in 1978 and being nominated as Best Fantasy feature at the 1980 Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films annual awards.

**Soundtrack Elements**

*It seems to me we’ve lost touch with the fear of nature... Tonight when we leave this building and there’s a special kind of wind blowing (and) if that wind is howling with a voice like the voice of a person, a four-year-old child might say to us, ‘The wind’s talking to us,’ and we’ll say, ‘No it isn’t, don’t be silly. It’s just howling around those wires’... It’s just part of something we’ve lost touch with, another way of seeing the world.* (Weir, in Kass, 1979: online)

Sound plays a central role in *The Last Wave*. Indeed, many key sequences of the film – and their sonic features – are imbued by the “numinous ambience” that Dean (1996: 2) ascribes to Aboriginal perceptions of place. While Dean’s use of the term emphasises the spiritual infusion of place and resultant holiness, the film’s sound (and particularly various sonic ambiences) embody a related aspect of numinosity, namely senses of awe that border on terror or panic. The term is derived from the Latin term *numen*, referring to the power of the divine that imbues places, material artefacts and, on occasion, human agents. This aspect is communicated in the film through a meld of atmos tracks (derived from natural sound sources) and sonic ambiences, low-dynamic sound passages that infuse the aural space as unsettling, reverberant underscores and occasionally rise to prominence for dramatic impact.

The mysterious aspects key to the film’s drama are established from the outset in a subtle opening sequence that plays on disjunctures between the screen images and the sound that accompanies them. The opening shot shows a mature Aboriginal male painting a design on the rock-face beneath an overhang at sunset. The soundtrack accompanies this with a low volume, indistinct sound (wind? waves? both?) punctuated by occasional birdcalls. The camera closes into the artist and

---

²⁰ Including a lack of special effects budget leading its final apocalyptic wave sequence being sourced from the Australian surfing film *The Crystal Voyager* (David Elphick, 1973).
shows him to be using a paintbrush before moving on to look at the images painted on the rock surface: a star-like design resting on a turtle's back, a dolphin or whale and (accompanied by bassier rumbles), a mysterious symbol comprising a cross inside concentric white circles. The image of this symbol then cross-fades to that of a sun-drenched, outback settlement under blue skies. Enigmatically, the bass rumbles continue over the transition. Indeed, they become more recognisably the sounds of a storm and increase in volume. The characters’ behaviour soon establishes that this sound is now a diegetic element, as individuals look to the sky, puzzled about the incongruous juxtaposition of sound and image. Realising that nature is ‘out of joint’ an older Aboriginal male gesticulates to the sky and hurries two Aboriginal boys into a shelter. The image track then switches to a schoolyard where the children are also increasingly puzzled. One boy encapsulates the enigma with the simple phrase, “there’s no clouds”. The rising sound of the storm then gives way to different noises, mixed loud on the soundtrack – the sound of rain gushing down and delighted children whooping with glee as they dance in it. The teacher then calls the soaked students inside, expressing her puzzlement with the simple phrase “(it) never rains in November”. After the excited children have been quietened down, a further sonic element intrudes in the form of a hard percussive drumming on the roof. As the teacher and children listen in alarm, the source becomes clear, as first one giant hailstone and then a flurry smash the classroom windows and litter the yard, their impact sounds mixing with the children’s screams. Peering anxiously at a hail-strewn landscape under a resolutely blue sky, the teacher’s nervous expression is underscored with a sustained, eerie electronic tone that carries over another image transition, this time to an equally sunny Sydney cityscape. The disjuncture of storms from a clear sky is not only foreshadowed and emphasised by the soundtrack; the sounds that cross over the transitions of image and locale shift from an ambiguous diegetic role to diegetic realism and then away again – weaving a trail across the narrative, cued by the mysterious circled cross symbol seen at the beginning.

While the opening sequence is non-musical, the film’s score often blends with sonic ambiances and supports its mysterious and spiritually imbued and brooding atmosphere. Indeed, one of the notable aspects of the film is the convergence of these elements. Despite this complementarity, sound mixer Phil Judd has emphasised that the final mixes were made without reference to the score, which was produced separately at the same time, and that the convergence of sound and music was a fortuitous outcome of the respective personnel’s interpretation of Weir’s overall creative brief. While emphasising that Weir “is one of the few Australian directors who is not ‘cloth-eared’ and who is able to use sound to tell a story”, Judd has also noted the considerable interpretative freedom afforded to the sound crew. The latter was, in substantial part, born of necessity, as lack of access to library music required the crew to produce their own Foley effects and record the film’s distinctive environmental sounds, such as frog noises. The film’s subtle sound mix, made in mono, also caused problems when mixed down for transfer to optical film track due to the number of bass frequencies present, a problem that was exacerbated by the use of similar frequencies in the score (ibid).

Suitably enough, for a commercial film representing a spiritual fantasy, the composer, Charles Wain was an experienced TV advertisement composer who lived

---

21 Interview with the author October, 2008.
22 Such as producing the hailstorm noises described above by pelting a corrugated iron sheet with walnut shells.
23 Confusingly, he is referred to in Unattributed (1978) as ‘Charles Wayne’ and is registered with Australasian Performing Rights Association for his composer credit for The Last Wave as Wain Myers. He is referred to in this chapter by his film credit surname.
on an ashram as a devotee of esoteric Hindu Sidda Yoga guru ‘Baba’ Muktananda. Wain has stated that his inspiration was “the element of spirituality in both the concept of the film and in many of the locations” (Unattributed, 1978: 26). Wain’s score was a notable innovation for Australian cinema by virtue of being primarily composed and performed on a (analogue) synthesizer. At that time, the instrument was relatively novel as a primary soundtrack provider, having been pioneered in this role in 1971 by Walter Carlos (for Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*) and, in the same year, by Gil Mellès for Robert Wise’s *The Andromeda Strain* and by subsequent composers such as Matt Camison in 1975 (for Just Jaeckin’s *Story of ‘O’*). Wain has identified that the synthesizer was appropriate for the film due to what he has described as the tendency for early-mid 1970s’ synthesizer music (of the style typified by German artists Tangerine Dream and Klaus Schuze) to resemble “chant-like tribal music” (*ibid*: 27) – presumably referring to their use of drones, slow modulations and gradual crescendos and diminuendos. These elements are strongly in evidence in the film’s soundtrack and are also associated with the iconic cinematic sound of Aboriginality: the didjeridu. Wain has characterised the decision to use didjeridu sounds in the score as Weir’s idea but his approach was to blend the instrument with his score, retaining its signature sound but infusing it as an ambient element, rather than a foregrounded one. The didjeridu sounds derived from tracks performed by David Gulpilil and these were subsequently slowed down to half-speed to “embellish” the instrument’s “eeri ness and to make it a much thicker and fatter sound without destroying its natural qualities” (*ibid*).

The predominant sonic colouration of the film, as described above, is an affective one, a numinous ambience that creates a continuing sense of unease for its white protagonist and its audience. The only point in the narrative when western music predominates is a brief diegetic sequence whose significance is more cryptic (and even arcane). This is all the more notable for its inscription within (arguably) the key scene of the film and the one where the processed didjeridu is most overtly associated with Aboriginal spiritual power. The sacred objects of the city’s secret Aboriginal clan are contained within (what has now become) an underground sewerage plant, close to the sea. While visiting there at night, an uninitiated Aborigine, Billy Corman (Athol Compton), is confronted by the clan’s mysterious shaman who tells him that his theft of sacred objects has been discovered and that he will die. Corman’s terror is signaled by a brisk rhythmic tapping that carries over the edit into a very different scene located inside a Sydney pub. The edit reveals the rhythm to be that tapped out on a bodhrán (a traditional Irish frame-drum) by a performer in a neo-traditional Irish music band as the introduction to an up-tempo reel. The link between the two scenes is made apparent by the image of Corman, drunk, with his head on the bar-top. The band (comprising a bodhrán, two fiddles, two guitars, a mandolin and accordion) plays as a group of young Aboriginal men walk in from the rain, confront Corman and chase him outside. A melee ensues and the police arrive, with Corman running off down an alley. The image then returns to the pub interior where the band is playing on, unconcerned. As the number concludes, the image cuts to a building site where Corman seeks escape, enmeshed in a sound mix of thunder, rain noises and police sirens, and then stops, startled, as he hears a high vocable call (not dissimilar to a traditional Australian ‘cooee’ call but without the final syllable). After a moment of silent stillness the sound of the didjeridu fills the soundspace, growling, with occasional guttural ‘barks’. In the dark, tense space of the building site, with Corman seeking to elude his pursuers as their shadows loom large on a wall behind him, the didjeridu signals primal power and menace, an interpretation that is reinforced when Corman encounters clan elder Charlie, pointing a bone at him and murmuring an incantation. Clutching his heart, Corman staggers back and dies.
The incantation, vocable and didjjeridu sounds clearly conform to the standard cultural and cinematic conventions of ‘sounding Aboriginal’, and function within the narrative in this regard but the cameo performance of Irish music is cryptic and open to interpretation in one of several ways. It can be seen to represent one essence of European settler society, a form implicitly ‘other’ to Aboriginal marginality. Alternatively, read in terms of the historical subordination of Irish settlers to an Anglo-British colonial establishment, it can be seen to offer a point of connection to Aboriginality. However, senses of connection are undermined by the narrative. The Aborigines in the bar appear indifferent to the music and enter the space primarily to pursue their target. Similarly the band are unconcerned both by the (somewhat surprising) presence of Aborigines in a ‘niche’ music venue and by the brawl that occurs. There is no sense of any inter-racial solidarity. In narrative terms, particularly in such a complex, subtly plotted narrative, the scene is oddly ambivalent. Turning to the music, the lively, uptempo ensemble performance can be seen as ‘spirited’ (if not spiritual) and the players are clearly communing, in that they are ‘locked into’ their groove, but the aims and effects of their collective engagement are so radically different to the spiritual murder that takes place outside that comparisons are strained. Nevertheless, there is a significant point of connection that has, if anything, increased since the decade of the film’s production – even if it requires unreasonably specialist knowledge to discern. As Graeme Smith (2001) has identified, there has been a particular syncretic engagement of Aboriginal music and Irish/Irish-derived Australian bush band music through use of the didjjeridu as a drone instrument in modern neo-traditional Irish music ensembles in the 1980s and 1990s. Although primarily sonic, rather than political and/or spiritual, a point of connection exists. However cryptically, The Last Wave inscribes the (actual) beginning of this connection in the form of the featured band, led by Declan Affley.25 A committed socialist and anti-authoritarian, Affley was a supporter of Aboriginal rights during the campaign for Aboriginal citizenship in the mid-late 1960s and went on to teach fiddle and banjo at the Eora Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Sydney’s Redfern in the mid-1980s until his sudden death in 1985. Orientated by this information, the scene has greater sense of connection to the film’s general themes, particularly with the benefit of hindsight. Yet it still operates on a markedly different level of textual operation – and requires more specific knowledges to interpret – than the film’s overall sonic design, its depiction of a world unsettled by a numinous ambience that reflects a preceding and more powerful and enigmatic culture.

The narrative has an extended climax whose drama is substantially generated by its soundtrack. Returning home after losing the court case, Burton’s rational universe becomes fully unhinged as his house disintegrates around him. Standing in his hall he hears deep subterranean rumblings as the house sways violently and the power cuts out. A loud barking didjeridu enters the mix, seconds before a tree smashes loudly through the rear glass door. Rain pours down on the house, flooding the upstairs, and thunder rumbles and lightning cracks intensify the mix as open doors and windows slam frantically to and fro. Looking outside into the storm, Burton sees Charlie beckoning him and holding the sacred stone in his outstretched hand. They drive to the sewerage plant together and climb down into the chambers below, where Charlie reveals his clan’s sacred place, where paintings explain the myth-narrative

---

24 Particularly in a decade in which Aboriginal presence in mainstream metropolitan pubs was minimal.
25 Affley was a British migrant of Irish and Welsh ancestry who settled in Australia in 1959 and became renowned for his spirited performances of Irish ‘rebel songs’ in inner city pubs and folk clubs in the 1960s and 1970s and formed one of the first Australian ‘bush bands’, The Wild Colonial Boys in 1969. In 1970 he began playing the traditional Uillean pipes, becoming one of the first Australian performers of the instrument.
that Burton has been struggling to comprehend. As he interprets the images, a slow synthesiser melody underscores the gravity of his revelation and, as he deciphers the calendar painted on the wall, a low rumble alludes to the film’s imminent conclusion. At this point a harsh didjeridu passage intrudes immediately before Burton sees the figure of the clan’s shaman, bedecked in ceremonial body-paint, speaking in language, forbidding him to interfere with what he has found. A brief conflict ensues, during which Burton kills him with the sacred triangular stone. As he flees the scene, dense, ominous tones of processed gurgling waters rumble on the soundtrack. As the film proceeds to its conclusion, the ‘Laws’ configured in the Dreamtime and the specific elements of the clan’s ‘Mulkurul’ prophecy that bind Burton into the narrative are enacted in the form of an apocalypse – represented as a giant wave (the ‘last wave’ of the film’s title) that looms over Burton as he kneels at the edge of the sea. Its sounds are massive and monstrous, comprising deep, bassy rumbles and watery churnings that signal imminent, inescapable and numinous doom.

Conclusion

*The Last Wave* provides its audience with a fantasy of Aboriginal spirituality and paranormal power that is radically ‘other’ to the metropolitan colonial West that the city of Sydney, 1970s’ Australian society and the film’s white characters represent. The soundtrack is dominated by tones and textures that imbue the cityscape, landscape and Aborigines’ underground sacred site with powers that reflect the clan’s “mystic communion” with “totemic beings” and their intimate connection with a “whole environment which is pervaded by the supernatural” (Dean, 1996: 2). In this manner, the film and its soundtrack posit an Aboriginal spirituality that collapses the sacred/secular split of Western cultures and offers a holistic model along the lines of the one that Bradley and Mackinlay identify in Yanyuwa culture, where “there is only one world, one environment, one country that is simultaneously material and spiritual” (2007: 77). Unfortunately for Burton and white Australia, this world is not theirs and their fate is in the hands of a Dreamtime prophecy that precedes them and which they are powerless to deflect. *The Last Wave’s* fantasy thereby reflects the deep anxieties of colonial culture, transported from far-away Europe. The rumbling, slowed-down didjeridu sounds blended with Wain’s synthesizer score and processed atmos tracks underlay the entire film and allow little, if any, sonic ‘light’ into the *numen* that Burton uncovers. While in *The Right Stuff* the didjeridu propels spiritual assistance to an astronaut in space, no protection (or quarter) is given in *The Last Wave*. Unlike that other national cinematic icon *Mad Max*, produced two years later, there is no suggestion of a post-Apocalyptic future for white Australia, with the soundtrack dwindling to a single, regular bleep – like the audio signal on a cardiac monitor – that cuts out before the credits conclude, leaving silence.

Thanks to Mark Evans and Elizabeth Mackinlay for their comments on previous drafts of this chapter, which was researched and written as part of activities for Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP0770026 ‘Music production and technology in Australian film: enabling Australian film to embrace innovation’.
Bibliography


Unattributed (1978) ‘Who the hell are you?’, Metro n43 Autumn, 14-16.
MORE THAN NOISE: The Integrated Soundtrack of Noise

Nick Hadland

Abstract

Conventional discourses accounting for film music’s subordination and the vertical stratification of image, sound and music have been superseded by more integrated and complex scoring approaches. Contemporary Australian films utilising a hybridised or interdisciplinary approach and, influenced by new technologies and media, adopt a more unified method of ‘sounding’ their narratives. Analysing Matthew Saville's Noise (2007), this article will highlight the operation of sound and music in relation to the film’s principal themes, exposing the complex machinations of the film’s auditory components. It will discuss these complexities with particular reference to the new perspective they provide to the film noir genre.

Keywords

Australian film, film noir, film music, sound design, Noise

Introduction

Contemporary Australian feature films have been welcomed ambivalently. New cinematic product often meets with, on the one hand, poor box office success while, on the other hand, domestic and international critical acclaim. Australian films attracting such acclaim such as Chopper (Andrew Dominick, 2000), Somersault (Cate Shortland, 2004), The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005) and Noise (Matthew Saville, 2007) share a common bond, namely, a sonically sophisticated approach to narrative development and the film text. However, the narratives of some more experimental feature films of the Australian cinema industry may discomfort audiences and create consternation for marketing personnel, thereby affecting box office. Narrated in unique styles and frequently with a significant emphasis on sound components, these films encounter difficulties competing with products with more easily accessible themes and approaches.

As the first decade of the new millennium closes, it is apparent that conventional attitudes towards film music – the orchestral score and all that it now encompasses – have been replaced by a more dynamic and integrated approach to the music track. Generally, such an approach accounts for those nuances of the film sound language (foley, sound effects, atmospheres, dialogue) that have been in one way or another integrated within a film’s soundtrack. In fact the ascendancy of a cohort of
auditory artists – since the 1970s termed ‘sound designers’¹ – demonstrates the increasing flexibility placed upon music and score, and inevitably its relationship with sound and image. Connoting a more artistic, aesthetically driven approach to ‘sculpting’ or ‘designing’ sound and music with image, these individuals have benefitted from advances in technology and created an environment through which to view those elements of film traditionally considered by authors such as Thomas Elsaesser² as an emotional or spectacular excess.

Aligned with this shift are perceptions of film music that embrace integration. The music track now more or less readily accommodates both original score and pre-recorded songs or instrumental items. A new framework that considers the integration of music within sound and sound with image is required, a stark opposition to more traditional frameworks that have typically stratified music or relegated it to the background (see Adorno and Eisler, 1994; Gorbman, 1987). In this way, one can recognise music as an organic property of film; as one of the many sound components employed on contemporary films.

Fittingly, as a new approach to film scoring, these practices have found a comfortable niche in the typically ‘arthouse’ style of many contemporary Australian films. ‘Arthouse’ films are usually characterised by the interplay between audiences finding meaning in image and an auteurist vision. Such a style breaks down connections between sequences and montages in part through music to enhance the philosophical meaning of images. Here music works both conceptually (metaphorically) and aesthetically (stylistically) to ‘sound’ the narrative. Thus, music serves to enhance the meaning generally conveyed via image, rather than conventionally relying on image for continuity and relevance. In Matthew Saville’s Noise, for example, music and sound are integrated consciously in what can be seen as a modern Australian take on the film noir genre. The interplay between these two sound components becomes the auditory cornerstone of the film. By analysing the use of sound and music in Noise, this article will account for the shift in scoring approaches. It will suggest a ‘horizontal’ framework through which to understand the operation of film music. In doing so, it will discuss Noise in the context of a more integrated framework demonstrating the relationship between music and other sound components. This will illustrate the ascendancy of music and sound in contemporary Australian films and its specific role in providing a new perspective on the film noir genre. Furthermore, it will demonstrate the nuances of this framework and its subsequent relationship to highlight and reveal the core meanings of the film.

**Cinema Sound/Music Framework**

Academic writing on film music theory has covered many aspects of the histories and complexities of film music theory and practice, from the ‘silent’ cinema era to the new millennial period. This is not to say, however, that it has become a static field of research.³ As time progresses significant contentions shape and re-shape our understanding of film music, and original and dynamic films will continue to do so. Such is the relevance of a new horizontal framework. Furthermore, the

---

¹ It is generally recognised that the term sound designer was first employed by Francis Ford Coppola as a designation for the work by Walter Murch on Apocalypse Now (1979) that involved all aspects of the film’s audio track including dialogue and sound effects through to re-recording in the post-production mixing. See Coppola, 2002: 53.

² See Elsaesser’s work on excess and melodrama in Elsaesser, 1985: 165.

³ As evidenced by the volume of film music and sound books now available from several publishers and the introduction of three new journals in the field in the last decade.
ascendancy of sound and music in film operate differently in this digital age as production practices and processes change with non-destructive editing and mixing. Post-structuralist styles of analysis, established primarily by Elsaesser and extended by Caryl Flinn (1992), Rick Altman et al (2000) and most recently Wendy Everett (2008), demonstrate the way in which music in American melodramas of the 1960s ‘open up’ sites for the mental projection of ‘imagery’. This imagery allows for an idealised, psychoanalytical perspective. This process, with the benefit of hindsight, recalls socio-cultural mythology to illustrate the way in which so-called excessive filmic structures (such as music) assist in reflecting external social tensions within private emotional contexts. For instance, in her analysis of Max Steiner’s ‘Tara’s theme’ in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Everett notes its role in introjecting Southern mythologies, romantic obsessions and epic themes.

While analysis of film sound and music has tended to assert that historical practices traditionally limited the role of sound and music, Altman identified a significant gap in research. Early writings, particularly by Theodore Adorno and Hans Eisler, tended to focus on ‘single-component studies’ or filmic uses of particular sound elements: dubbing, effects, the voice and voiceover, to name a few. Significantly Altman, with McGraw Jones and Sonia Tatroe, opened up a space through which to understand the relationships among soundtrack components. Their term “mise-en-bande” (2000: 341), meaning the interaction of sound components on the sound track, recognises the need to develop a language for sound track analysis that is as competent as our highly organised image referent system. However this method remains relatively diagrammatical and focuses on a period of early Hollywood synchronised sound films that is frequently analysed, the revelations of which seem to confirm “the awkwardness of early sound handling” (Altman et al, 2000: 351).

Without detracting from this seminal research, such a retrospective, or, to use the ominous term ‘nostalgic’, approach simply perpetuates the notion that sound in early cinema was riddled with practical and technical difficulties. Applying this system to contemporary films can reveal the way in which auditory artists have developed new, innovative and highly complex ways to balance the sound/music/image triptych, reducing the conventional focus on image alone. For when Everett suggests that the ascendancy of music has registered “a change of voice, an indication of film’s adoption of a contrapuntal structure” she still believes that “music, as signifier, cannot ‘mean’ directly. It can only connote or infer” (2008: 13). However, in contemporary films, providing greater ascendancy to their aural structure, sound and music appear as a parallel with image, existing interdependently. The combination of sound, music and image operate together to provide a multi-dimensional text, unable to be separated without altering or threatening the fabric of the film and film viewing experience.

As such a more appropriate framework through which to understand the interrelationship of different sound elements needs to be established. A horizontal approach to these three elements (imagine music, sound and image scattered across the broad spectrum of filmic structures as opposed to hierarchically subjugating them) is perhaps a more constructive method insofar as it enables an understanding of the unique yet interwoven position each holds in relation to the other. This framework assists an awareness of film flow (and time/duration aspects), and an understanding of the contribution of all elements to narrative. Guiding the development of this new approach is Martin Miller Marks’s contention that, in sound cinema,
There is no repertoire of ‘pieces of film music’ at all – only pieces of film...
The primary material of film music, both for the audience and the researcher, is not a recording or a score but the film itself. (Marks, 1997: 4)

Such an observation accounts for the fact that materially, film is usually experienced as a whole.4 Essentially, this characteristic provides a succinct metaphor for contemporary ways of receiving the sound/music/image relationship. In the case of Noise, sound and music renegotiate the ‘prejudice of the iconic’ in relation to film noir. Despite other sound related reliances such as the voiceover or jazz music, film noir is essentially a visual genre, epitomised by the act of looking and – more so – seeing, detecting or uncovering. In Noise, what results is notably complex: a film whose primary concern for both the protagonists and the viewer is hearing the unheard.

Hearing Noise

Set in suburban Melbourne, southeast Australia, Noise is a story of suburban tragedy told with a distinctly Australian sentiment. The narrative is centred on Graham McGahan (Brendan Cowell), an ‘ordinary cop’ suffering tinnitus and the possibility of cancer. With dubious concern for his health or wellbeing, he is removed from duty and relegated to a mobile detective caravan in a suburb recently shocked by a series of gruesome murders. McGahan, disillusioned with himself and his choices in life, is at first unwilling to engage with concerned individuals of the community but eventually finds some solace in the assistance his posting brings. However, as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that everyone has a story. Ultimately, McGahan’s self-centredness coupled with the symptoms of his affliction confuses the investigation of the case and obscures his ability to distinguish between those members of the community who wish to help and those who mean to hinder. Heard/unheard elements thereby operate on several diegetic and extra-diegetic levels.

From the outset Noise appears to be an archetypal film noir showcasing a nocturnal urban landscape and an unsolvable murder in the city. The opening shot depicts the silhouetted Melbourne cityscape against an eerie piano theme, accompanied by an airy ambient soundscape. The music, becoming softer, merges with the crescendo of the grinding steel of a train as it echoes through a network of fluorescently-lit tunnels. Here we are introduced to Lavinia Smart (Maia Thomas) walking towards her train, the distorted and compressed treble of techno music only just audible through her headphones. At first oblivious to her surroundings, she sits, gently swaying aboard the train. Yet, as she gradually becomes conscious, what surrounds her is a grisly revelation. At the same time we find McGahan on a routine check of a station, his police radio emitting distorted vocal fragments. “Sorry I’m in a tunnel and my battery’s cactus!” McGahan exclaims in response to his partner’s calls to him. Exiting via the escalator his partner yells to him again, almost sub-audibly: “Can’t you hear?” an expression that inevitably becomes a focus of the film. At this point the image becomes bouncy and distorted as a kind of static or white noise fuses with the rattling escalator and McGahan collapses, head first, on the floor.

Such is the confusion of the world we find in Noise. This opening sequence provides a succinct introduction to the fallibility, faults and frailty of humans in

---

4 Although today’s digital viewing facilities (particularly DVD home theatres) provide innumerable ways to ‘view’ films.
contemporary society amidst the ‘atmospheric disturbance’ of everyday life. It highlights miscommunication and a lack of personal connection. Essentially, the polyphony of the narrative draws together disparate characters and events through the shared experience of disassociation and grief. Underlying this severance, however, are the fundamental relationships that are forged and the acts of heroism that prevail, delivering glimmers of hope amidst the darkness of humanity. Essentially this theme of connection/disconnection foregrounds much of the complex philosophical musings that become the crux of the narrative.

Essentially, the polyphonic narrative is evoked by the sound/music dynamic provided by original music composer Bryony Marks and sound designer Emma Bortignon who collaborated closely “to blur the lines between ‘the music’ and ‘the sound’” (Marks, in Saville, 2007: unpaginated). The two elements at once synergise and compete as a reflection of the narrative. Marks recalls that,

We wanted [the music] to merge seamlessly with the sound design in magnifying the horror of chronic tinnitus... and most importantly, we wanted it to link disparate characters and events, to show that, while they each live out their own, small lives, they are bound by a world with its own terrible and wonderful, random and relentless rhythms. We feel that if we achieved this sense of an abstract, elemental force at work, then the characters’ struggle towards decency would resonate. (ibid)

Generally, film noir, extending the conventions of melodrama, utilises music for its spectacular value, introjecting an “odd, unsettling quality” (Flinn, 1992: 114). In Noise, however, music and sound possess a more integrated presence. Rather than simply ‘lending to’ the nihilistic mood, evoking the seedy underbelly of the interstitial metropolis or commenting ironically on tragic events, the combined use of ambience, noise and orchestral music take an active role in mediating the narrative. What results is a deeper kind of psychological engagement that obscures McGahan’s subjectivity as he performs his investigation.

Furthermore, the music and sound of Noise lend spatially to the claustrophobia of suburban Melbourne (filmed for the most part at night) and the cramped space of the police caravan where McGahan is located. Writing on the spaces of modernity in film noir, Edward Dimenberg suggests that,

The metropolis portrayed in the film noir cycle seldom appears defamiliarized or re-enchanted, a space of genuinely enhanced freedom and possibility. Instead, it hyperbolically presents the contrasts and rhythms of the city (including music and sound) as elements of a highly rationalized and alienating system of exploitative drudgery permitting few possibilities of escape. (2004: 14)

Such hyperbole is reminiscent of the ‘conceits’ that not only appear in much of noir dialogue but in the complex labyrinthine structure of the cityscape. Back alleys, sewers and neon bars act as Dalian metaphors for the Freudian subconscious and for the most part music assists in evoking the urban ‘rhythms’ that, as Marks recalls, connect disparate characters and events. Nevertheless, given the suburban

---

5 Described by Saville as being intentionally ‘prosaic’ (Noise press kit, 2007).
6 See for instance Naremore’s discussion of Chinatown (Polanski, 1974) and David Lynch’s Mulholland Dr. (Lynch, 2001) in Naremore, 2008: 36, 61, 209.
7 For a review of the geography of the subconscious space in film noir, see Dyer (1977).
locale, Saville has chosen to focus these metaphors around the police caravan that physically entraps McGahan. Interestingly, David Clarke refers to film noir’s role in extending the process by which “Hollywood fictions codify social conflicts in individualistic terms, by grounding its logic of character and action in the protocols of popularised psychoanalysis” (1997: 91). This explicitly recalls Elsaesser’s analysis of music in melodrama where the private/public, individual/social dichotomies are exploited by music to reflect tensions in the realm of the narrative. In Noise, sound and music work to recode social conflicts and existential insights in individualistic terms (seen in McGahan’s personal development). This is particularly evident in the interplay between music and the ‘sound’ of tinnitus. However, it is in this interplay that music becomes a part of the broader spectrum of filmic structures, not always distinguished against the random and relentless rhythms of the film.

In this sense, music does not simply provide dramatic excess or amplify mood. Rather it becomes another intricacy of the city: a feature of (sub)urban and, more so, psychological decay that is ostensibly overlayed, yet comes to be experienced as an organic product of the diegesis. For instance, the straining strings and rumbling cello that often accompany scenes featuring some type of kinetic chaos (for example the lengthy, meandering shot of a Senior Detective arriving at the scene of the murders on the train) not only dramatise the narrative but in many respects highlight the latent ‘noise’ of tinnitus that seems to disturb our experience of the film. As such, the stylised, nocturnal imagery of Noise acts as an expression or externalisation of the ‘terror within’ that is reinforced by the tension introjected by the score: the interplay between the film’s music and the sound design is essential to the film. More specifically the sound dimension of tinnitus operates as a hyperbolic evocation of the everyday noise “that clutters up the understanding of events and motivations and other people” (McFarlane, 2007: 34-5). Therefore, the score plays an active role in ‘sounding’ the cityscape and evoking the protagonist’s subjectivity by self-reflexively ‘cluttering’ the narrative for the viewer.

“A Reflection Of Itself”: Music In Noise

The presence of music within the diegesis is cleverly revealed in the dialogue of Noise. Halfway through the film Caitlin (Katie Wall), McGahan’s girlfriend, attempts to soothe the irritation of his tinnitus as she cradles him in her lap. She observes that, just as “every colour has an opposite... every note has an opposite, every sound has a reflection of itself and they cancel themselves out”. Considering that on many occasions the musical score is almost inaudible or unrecognisable when combined with the high pitched ringing of McGahan’s tinnitus, it can certainly be argued that music is another feature of the soundscape, as important as the other sound components working with the image track. Characterised by an orchestral swelling of predominantly piano and strings, the reliance on music to affect mood becomes somewhat irrelevant. Instead, music is utilised to reflect concepts that are being played out at a thematic level.

The orchestral (or ‘classical’) music has particular significance in arthouse cinema. Russell Lack acknowledges this, suggesting that,

...rather than be polemically directed by a loaded sequence of montages...‘arthouse’ cinema has its audiences engaged in solving a puzzle themselves in concert with the film’s unfolding. Cinematic images no longer represent the world, but rather rethink the world according to
the auteurist director’s own philosophical beliefs and concepts. (1997: 297)

Importantly, Lack goes on to suggest that, classical music, like film or poetry, encodes subjective or existential experiences of life and being into another, ‘readable’ form using the language or devices relevant to that specific discipline. As such he argues that classical music in these ‘arthouse’ films is often employed to recreate “attitudes of existentialism” (Lack: 298). While the classical music examples Lack discusses are largely pre-existing and ones that carry prior cultural resonances, the original score of Noise functions in a similar manner.

As has been argued, music in Noise provides a counterpoint for McGahan’s tinnitus and a reflection of this ambience or noise, with the two sonic components in constant conflict with each other. In this way the musical score adopts an active role within the film, as well as serving to highlight and intensify moments of tension (particularly Lavinia’s collapse on the train after having been confronted by the mysterious gunman, or the revenge attack on a local disabled community member, ‘Lucky Phil’). Music becomes integrated into the soundscape and provides an aural divergence that is intertwined with the image and sound within the realm of the diegesis. Moreover, when music serves a coherent function in relation to the narrative and images on screen, it establishes a sense of irony, increasing narrative tension but also evoking existential concerns pertinent to the film.

Figure 1: McGahan in his suburban ‘office’

Ultimately, the musical score of Noise assumes this ironic pretext to highlight the existential and philosophical elements of the film. This is prominent in the final sequence in which McGahan, confined to his caravan to celebrate Christmas and watching Caitlin as a member of the orchestra at a televised Christmas Carols performance (Fig 1), is attacked by an irate antagonist, Craig Finlay. A local who expresses ‘interest’ in the murder case, Finlay has constantly taunted McGahan to engage in some type of violent action and this inevitably results in a standoff. With a shotgun, Finlay blasts holes through the walls of McGahan’s makeshift office; all the while the soft harmony of the Christmas carols from the old television set ironically frames the sequence. While McGahan fumbles for his gun to retaliate, the sound of heavy breathing over a brief interlude between carols tightens the tension. Now the gunfight moves outside where McGahan is hit in the back from a pistol shot. Strangely, compared to the rest of the film and amidst the confusion, we are
not exposed to the ringing of the tinnitus. Instead, the ‘tinny’ carols emanating from the small television provide a sense of clarity for the viewer, a contrast to the auditory convolution that sound and music have played throughout the film.

The television, or more specifically, the music from the television (which assists in dissolving or blurring our perception of the diegesis), provides a disturbing clarity to the final sequence in a manner usually only achieved by silence. Attempting to shoot McGahan, Finlay accidentally fires a shot into the windscreen of a passing car, causing it to veer off the road and into a power pole. Reminiscent of Chinatown (Polanski, 1974), the crashed vehicle emits a blasting horn noise and a baby on the back seat begins to scream. McGahan then struggles to reload his gun before taking a clean shot at Finlay. At this point an audio dissolve – a technique blurring the boundaries of the diegesis – absorbs the televised carols and a non-diegetic orchestra that begins to accompany the choir, and the film soundtrack swells to a crescendo. McGahan stumbles to the car where the baby lies before collapsing onto the road. Here diegetic sound is dissolved almost completely as a wash of music, dialogue and sound effects place the viewer in the perspective of the wounded McGahan. As he lies there, a montage of shots between a police car with Lavinia in the back (radios exclaiming “officer down”) and Caitlin on the television inside, precedes the overwhelming high volume arrival of a police helicopter. A point of view shot shows the helicopter hovering over McGahan, its searchlight beaming down on his dying body before a final cut to a long shot of the street scene, where the high pitch frequency of tinnitus slowly builds before darkness and an elongated silence.

This dramatic and affecting sequence demonstrates how music and sound play a critical role in the structuring of the film. As has been suggested, the interplay between sound and music contributes significantly to the film’s poetic and meditative nature, positioning the film as a type of contemplation for the viewer. Quite literally the film can be seen as a visual construction of its score, both kinetically (in the ‘movement’ or progression of the narrative) as well as sonically.

Building gradually, the film swells and pulses, receding in areas, before coming to a loud and triumphant conclusion, a sequence that is ironically set to the diegetic sound of the television resounding the peace and joy themes of the Christmas carols. The distinct combination of music and sound creates this effect, serving as a metaphor for its auteuristic style of auditory practice. This is a sophisticated, technical approach to film scoring. Mapped against the mise-en-bande model used by Altman (2000) in his analysis of sound components and their relation to image, it is clear that music has dramatic effect in relation to the narrative arc. Rather than simply accentuating the development of the drama, music and sound play an active role in cluttering the narrative, obscuring a clear perception of the film at critical points. Instead of providing a type of emotional ‘guide’ to the narrative, music and sound engage the viewer in the psychology of our fallible protagonist Graham McGahan. Moreover, they contribute to the density of the film and its polyphonic sensibilities.

As the film’s title suggests, Noise can be understood to subjugate the act of seeing. For instance, much of the film is set in the caravan, at night under harsh halogen lights or in poorly lit streets. Such visual deprivation emphasises that hearing, or the ability to hear, is of primary importance. Composer Bryony Marks recognised

---

8 Although McGahan does appear to experience ringing, particularly as he tries to hum the note G-flat as Caitlin has suggested.
this in her approach to the score, stating that listening is central to the premise of the film (Saville, 2007). A striking technique, this can be interpreted as a conceptual counterpoint to the use of sight and seeing in Nicholas Roeg’s Don’t Look Now (1973) where the disparities between vision and blindness (metaphors for death and foresight) come to represent for the audience the importance placed on the metaphysical act of seeing in film. In Noise what the audience hears or cannot hear – or rather, what the director wants the audience to hear – enhances the enigma. Sound and music enshroud the narrative in mystery and only when we can divorce ourselves from its overwhelming presence and decode its density can we comprehend the tragedy of the narrative. This is a crucial recognition, given that conventionally our reception of cinema is established visually, particularly in melodrama or film noir where the spectacle relies on the phenomenon of scopophilia or the gaze. Therefore, one can surmise that Noise is engaging the act of hearing on the same intellectual level as the eye, confirming the engagement of music, sound and image in this contemporary Australian film.

“Can’t You Hear?”: Aural Assault in Noise

In Noise, tinnitus replaces a more recognisable film noir device, namely, the voiceover narration. In classic film noir features from as early as the 1930s and 40s, voiceover is often responsible for revealing, with hindsight, only so much as will be required to hold the attention of the audience. It provides tension and clarity but, at the same time, misdirection, allowing us to sympathise with the foibles of the protagonist. In Noise, tinnitus takes on this role, effectively ‘suturing’ the audience into the world of the narrative as well as, albeit indirectly, providing McGahan with a ‘super-human’ ability to decide between right and wrong. The ‘good cop lured astray’ motif is reversed through the presence of tinnitus and McGahan, an ordinary self-centred human being, is set on the path of righteousness by his affliction. The ‘noise’ of tinnitus, then, is essentially the cornerstone to the film. Just as music tones and colours the film, this noise mediates not only the narrative but the viewer’s ability to interpret its meaning and “to understand the everyday struggle humans face to remain good” (Saville, 2007).

Commonly found in film noir, the fallibility of the protagonist is central to the narrative. McGahan’s affliction obscures his role as a detective, yet provides him with a type of sacrificial redemption. Caryl Flinn suggests that the power of music or the ability to hear in film noir often provides characters with a kind of magical vision. This ‘miraculous’ power usually equates to a character’s creative abilities, the power of redemption or an “epistemological insight” (1992: 114). In Noise McGahan’s tinnitus (his inability to hear clearly) ironically delivers him a type of redemption as well as what can be considered a ‘special sight’. His physical deterioration – the ringing in his ears and the possibility of cancer – forces him to reassess his choices in life, his relationships with others and his ultimate ‘judgement,’ as it were, should his time come. His final choice, whether conscious or not, is noble: to protect others at his own expense. Ultimately in Noise (depending on one’s interpretation of the ending), McGahan and his nemesis Finlay are responsible for erasing each other; the binaries of good and evil cancelling each other out. This is distinctly reminiscent of Caitlin’s attempts to soothe the ringing of McGahan’s tinnitus by humming its reflection: a G-Flat note. While Saville has attempted to avoid diametric clichés, preferring to allow the script to “invite us to vest faith in fractured characters” (2007), yet, on a philosophical level, McGahan overcoming Finlay is essentially an everyday victory in the constant struggle against adversity and those forces that will us to evil. In this manner, traces of
binary oppositions, such as good and evil, heaven and hell (and Christian themes) remain prevalent in *Noise*. Underscoring these elements is the interplay between music and other aural components of the film in an attempt to clarify, as it eventually does for McGahan, the meaning of the complexities of this philosophical meditation.

Music has often played a critical role in dictating or providing clarity to emotional subjectivity in cinema. In *Noise* however, music has a more complex function. Marks’s sombre orchestral score, featuring long, strained string sections of viola, cello and double bass, is for the most part fused with an omnipresent collage of ambient sound and sound FX. This is coupled with a high frequency and static distortion as the manifestation of McGahan’s tinnitus. The resulting ubiquitous ‘noise’ plays a critical role in evoking McGahan’s subjectivity as well as mediating actively the protagonist’s (and more so our own) perceptions of the violence, the murders and the culprit. For instance, quite early in the film, McGahan, becoming increasingly frustrated by the identified “ringing” in his ears, rushes around his home turning on whatever appliances are at hand: radios, stoves, ovens, stereos, showers, fans, record tables and, more importantly, a television set that he tunes to static in a futile attempt to ‘drown out’ the internal noise. Instead, what results is an excruciatingly ‘noisy’ sequence, far louder than much of the film and a direct contrast to much of the whispered dialogue, particularly between McGahan and Caitlin. The high volume of this sequence shocks the viewer into the realm of the diegesis, allowing for a direct engagement with this sensorial experience. McGahan’s inability to hear clearly in important situations becomes that of the viewer and shapes the way we experience the film subconsciously. Furthermore, acting as a concise example of the operation of sound and even dialogue throughout the film – sometimes remaining unnoticed, mumbled or sub-audible – the resulting ambiguity accentuates characters’ constant frustration with one another, as they interrogate each other with, “Did you hear that?!,” “are you a good listener?,” “what, are you deaf?”.

The inability to hear (or to be deaf) that *Noise* posits is more fallible than the inability to see. To hear or to listen is to sympathise, to empathise with a fellow human being. As in the story of Babel whose inhabitants were cast across the face of the Earth for their pride and cursed with the burden of language, modern Melbourne comes to represent the contemporary noir citadel whose many cultures, egotisms and intolerances sever human communication and connection. This is particularly evident in the ineffectual use of terms such as “fuckwit” which, although delivered with gusto, McGahan notices to be the only put-down that people can summon to express the discontent, anger, fear and paranoia that each of the characters feel towards each other. As McGahan begins to understand, listening or hearing one another is central to repairing these inter-personal connections and, as such, could perhaps be the key to empathy, to humanity.

Reparation, however, is particularly complex in the contemporary urban space. Georg Simmel argues socialisation requires the development of a “calculated indifference” to those ‘others’ who litter the streets and public transport (in Dimendberg, 2004: 22). This indifference appears in *Noise* in a sonic form, for instance, at the start of the film via the image and sound of the headphones Lavinia wears as she boards the train. Simmel also argues that ‘detection’ involves the awareness of the ‘stranger’, of the outsider who poses an ambiguous threat to society. Such is McGahan’s role in manning the caravan: to detect and report, to listen, “to sit here and put down whatever the mouth-breathers say or do”, as Rhonda Harris instructs. Reluctant to ‘spy’ on the community at first, McGahan
eventually finds solace in the assistance he provides to the suburb and its eccentric inhabitants. The culmination of this occurs after a lengthy monologue detailing his ‘scientifically supported’ philosophy on eternity, when Lucky Phil is attacked. McGahan’s tinnitus, however, ironically obscures his ability to perform the required detection, and (in typical noir style) such is the fatal flaw of the film’s protagonist, his ‘indifference’ to Craig Finlay’s visits and taunts, resulting in his fatal wounding in the film’s final sequence. Thus the operation of noise and sound works psychologically in the diegesis, particularly in its moments of intensity, as well as metaphorically. The film’s final sequence enables the viewer to muse on not only the quotidian aspects of everyday life but, at a more universal level, of what it means to do good and how to remain good.

Conclusion

Contemporary approaches to film scoring have been extended in recent decades. More complex scoring methods that integrate sound and music with the visual image, with each other and with the narrative are becoming increasingly common. The result is an intricately woven text that forms a unified whole. Experiencing *Noise*, it becomes apparent that music and sound are integrated in such a way as to comment on each other, on image and on the narrative. Both are active and crucial to the way in which this story is told: indeed, elements of sound are the story. An analysis of these thereby requires a horizontal approach to the film.

*Noise* is concerned with universal, humanistic issues about responsibility and human interaction. On this meta-level, the private contexts and individual psyche that is suggested by melodrama as representing dialectics (the opposing forces of social issues) are littered with allegorical references to what it is to be human. Rather than be relegated to the background or experienced as a mood amplifier or tension device, the music and its fusion with the ubiquitous high pitch frequency of McGahan’s tinnitus act in a similar way to a film noir voiceover. They provide an insight into the protagonist’s subjectivity as well as acting as a conceptual metaphor for the real-life structures that clutter our perception of the world around us. More than a partial view of life around us, *Noise* emphasises how individual physical capabilities (or lack thereof) provide a further filter on what we can and cannot experience. As such, in this contemporary take on the film noir, the divergence offered by sound and music obscures quite literally the viewers’ cinematic interpretations and their ability to solve the mystery. Metaphorically, McGahan’s inability to hear or to sense becomes our inability to decide, whether it be between right and wrong or good and evil; the lines become blurry and we are left to acknowledge that, without our senses, a soul can become very lost.

Bibliography


SOUNDING EAST OF EVERYTHING
Australian Television, Music and Place

Liz Giuffre

Abstract

East of Everything is a contemporary Australian television drama series shot on the New South Wales North Coast in and around the popular tourist destination of Byron Bay. In addition to utilising the region’s visual beauty – a cinematographic technique commonly employed in Australian drama – East of Everything has harnessed the musical culture that has developed in the area over time. The series relies on its soundtrack to create a sense of place and illuminate the program’s dramatic progression. This article will explore the use of music to ‘place’ East of Everything, examining the incorporation of pre-existing and specially commissioned material. I will show that the sonic representation of place through music has been key to the program’s success, and that place in the Australian drama is revealed sonically to be as diverse, emotive and striking as the region’s visual landscape.

Keywords
Television, Soundtrack, Australian music, Byron Bay, Surfing Culture

Introduction

Billingham (2000) argues that television drama often relies on the creation of ‘geo-ideological’ relationships to attract audiences. As part of his evaluation of various contemporary British and American television drama series, he suggests that many successful programs created a “dialectic of literal notions of place and location, transposed with their ideological marking, signing and delineation” (2000: 1). For Billingham the depiction of place was central to the success of these television texts, with the program’s target audience engaged as visuals and sound worked in “symbiotic tandem” to create an “imagined city” (2000: 119). One example Billingham described was the representation of 1990s Manchester in the UK’s Channel 4 drama Queer as Folk. Noting the program’s use of a particular type of music, the “pounding, rhythmic signature theme which is percussive and punctuated by a celebrity whoop of anticipated pleasure” (2000: 120), Billingham argues that the aural and visual signifiers of place were key to securing the program’s target audience, in the case of Queer as Folk, a mostly young, queer (and queer-friendly) demographic.

Billingham argues that the representation of place is central to television drama’s success, with the creation of a “longed-for performative utopia” (2000: 119) key to attracting audience attention. This description provides a useful analytical
framework to consider how television drama functions generally and, for my purposes, specifically the debut season of *East of Everything*. A contemporary Australian television drama shot in and around the Northern New South Wales (NSW) town of Byron Bay and screened on ABC TV in 2008, *East of Everything* had an older target audience, namely adults aged in their 40s to 60s. Also, like *Queer as Folk*, *East of Everything* depicted place in a way that would appeal directly to this audience, with the NSW North Coast shown also as a performative utopia, a place that encouraged its inhabitants to retain their links to the youth cultures they were once engaged with in the 1960s and 70s. As a contemporary Australian drama, *East of Everything* tells the story of a family who are reunited after the death of the family matriarch, with lead character Art (Richard Roxburgh) returning to his home town after years away to re-establish ties with his family, former friends and long estranged teenaged son. In this article I will analyse music’s role in representing place in this way but also, more broadly, music’s role in *East Of Everything*’s attempt to establish a viable alternative to the Australian urban production capitals of Sydney and Melbourne. I will do this by examining music that was both sourced from pre-existing material, and specially commissioned for the series.2

Importance of Place for Australian Television Production

Connections to place have been widely acknowledged as beneficial for Australian creative industries, with the depiction of place able to characterise Australian film in the international marketplace. As Gibson described,

> During the 1970s and early 1980s, filmmakers (encouraged in part by the ‘culturally responsible’ funding policies of the Australian Film Commission) were attempting to create a cohesive view of national character through the rendition of the Australian landscape as if it were the one thing that all factions of society held in common. (1994: 49)

Gibson’s historical survey remains relevant to discussions of more recent Australian screen productions, with film and television particularly continuing to reference place as a way to ‘mark’ Australian identity3 and therefore engage audience interest. Film models such as Gibson’s remain relevant to contemporary television drama, so much so that importance of Australian community support for television and film production was debated in NSW State Parliament on 18 June 2008. *East of Everything* was named during this parliamentary session as an example of a production that had been particularly well received within the local community where the production had been based, a reception in part resulting from the producer’s consultation with residents (Parliament of NSW, 2008: 68).

*East of Everything* has been expressly connected with Byron Bay since the project was in pre-production. The first series was financed in conjunction with ABC TV, production company Twenty20, Film Finance Australia and a $100m Regional Filming Funding grant by the New South Wales (NSW) government – a coalition of financiers who expected that the production would provide residents of the NSW North Coast region with many opportunities. This expectation was demonstrated

---

1 The ABC is the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the publicly funded Australian national broadcaster.
2 This article will focus on the debut season of *East of Everything*, however a second season has also been completed and screened in Australia on ABC TV during 2009.
3 While there are various examples of this, Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* (2008) is the most obvious recent one.
when the NSW Member for Tweed\(^4\) Neville Newell officially launched *East of Everything* a few months before filming began.\(^5\) Newell explained that Byron Bay and the surrounding region was home to “the largest cluster of screen practitioners outside Melbourne and Sydney” but “often these professionals need to travel for their work”.\(^6\) Therefore, he was particularly supportive of *East of Everything*’s production in the area, describing it as “a wonderful opportunity for these highly accomplished professionals to be able to work in their local region” (ibid).\(^7\) Newell’s praise for *East of Everything*’s shooting location was echoed by the show’s producer Fiona Eagger who, Newell explained, would “relocate to the Northern Rivers Region from Melbourne for the production” (ibid). Eagger identified the decision to film in Byron Bay as part of her long term plan to develop industrial infrastructure in the area, something that those marketing *East of Everything* capitalised on, as ‘Made in Byron Bay’ was displayed in red on the program’s subsequent CD and DVD releases.\(^8\) In addition, by shooting in and around Byron Bay, the financiers could reasonably expect an increase in tourist activity in the area, an effect known as ‘film induced tourism’, that is, a situation in which “the pervasiveness of film” (Beeton, 2005: 3) may be a direct catalyst for tourism.\(^9\) As such, place was a central part of the production of *East of Everything* even before filming commenced, as it was through connections to place that the series was able to secure funding.

**Beginning with a Theme Song...**

Added to the financial benefits of shooting in Northern NSW, the producers of *East of Everything* chose this location because of its potential for artistic expression. As Eagger explained,

> Ten years ago [writer and producer] Deb Cox had a dream to shoot *SeaChange* in Byron Bay and at that point she was told that it wasn’t possible. Deb didn’t give up and *East of Everything* is the realisation of that desire. (Member for Tweed Press Release, 9/3/07)

Eagger’s description above outlines the role place has in her career and, in citing *SeaChange*, the critically acclaimed ABC drama from the 1990s, Eagger invited audiences and the wider public to draw comparisons between the established program and the then yet-to-be-released *East of Everything*. However unlike

---

\(^4\) Tweed is the New South Wales State Government electorate that covers Byron Bay and its surrounds.

\(^5\) Newell explained, “East of Everything will employ more than 65 local crew, 85 cast members and around 200 extras for the 15-week production period” (Member for Tweed Press Release, 9/3/07).

\(^6\) This emphasis on Byron Bay’s connection to the film industry, both as a shooting location and as a place rich with residents with film industry skills, is also made by the Byron Shire Council as part of its promotion of the region. See in particular ‘Byron Loves Film’ on the Council’s official website (available via http://www.byron.nsw.gov.au/Economy/Creative/Film, accessed 20/8/09). See also the site for the screen industry facilitating organisation, Screenworks, at: http://www.screenworks.com.au/.

\(^7\) Newell also articulated an expectation that *East Of Everything* would provide opportunities for less specialised industries as well, “The production will also inject millions into the local economy through the use of services like accommodation, catering and construction” (ibid).

\(^8\) This symbol is available as mentioned above, as well as on the ABC corporate press release for the series, accessed via www.abc.net.au/abccontentsales/programsalesworldwide/download/EofE.pdf, accessed 10/8/09.

\(^9\) In this study Beeton uses the term ‘film based tourism’ but discusses both film and television texts and shooting locations and notes the retrospective advantage local businesses were able to gain through exposure from *SeaChange* demonstrates the advantage of publicity through such television exposure, as following the success of the series some businesses began to advertise themselves in connection with the show directly, “‘Barwon Heads, the home of SeaChange’” (2005: 72). As Beeton concluded, following a study of audiences of the show as well as locals from Barwon, “the logos and promotional videos and CD soundtracks are also tangible products from the series [SeaChange] that can provide additional destination marketing material” (2005: 67-69).
SeaChange, which, as its name suggests, was centred around the experiences of an urban woman who moved to the coast to change her life, *East of Everything* uses place as more than a site to locate the program’s dramatic action. This specificity began with the show’s name and its theme tune, ‘A Most Peculiar Place’. Originally released in 2002 by Machine Translations (aka Greg ‘J’ Walker, *East of Everything*’s musical producer), ‘A Most Peculiar Place’ was edited only minimally to become the program’s theme. As Donnelly maintains, title themes provide product differentiation within a crowded arena of competing television programs. They provide essential branding [and therefore facilitate] instant recognition of the forthcoming programming (2005:145). ‘A Most Peculiar Place’ functions for *East of Everything* in the way Donnelly describes. The song’s introduction provides ‘product differentiation’ immediately as its use of eastern inspired instrumentation and singing style, repeating the song’s main melodic hook, is accompanied by handclaps and guitar. As such, the song sonically stands out, as it deviates from the popular convention of using mainstream western rock and pop songs as television theme tunes. The verses feature a smooth and relatively unadorned style of the main male vocal, and are in contrast with the clear delivery of the song’s lyrics:

```
And what will you do who have travelled so far
divided by light, your lucky star
the memory, a taste
of how you really are
in a most peculiar place.12
```

Like Donnelly’s description of the use of The Who song ‘Who Are You’ (1978) as “a reference to the narrative’s search” in contemporary drama *CSI: Criminal Investigation* (2005: 145–6), the lyrics of ‘A Most Peculiar Place’ also refer to *East of Everything*’s main narrative. The emphasis on the final lyric, the ‘peculiar place’, serves as a musical clue to the way place is represented in the program.

Walker’s music creates a sonic branding for *East of Everything*. Using ‘A Most Peculiar Place’ as a musical style guide, Walker described the music he’d been commissioned to compose for the show as a “kind of cousin” to work he’d done previously, with his composition from the television program undertaken using tools that were “part of the palate of things that I had been composing with, you know, ukuleles and sitars and Chinese violins and... things that you just don’t hear that often in a [television] soundtrack”. Walker explained that he composed music for the program “as part of a collaborative process with the filmmakers”, and that music was used to help achieve the series’ overall artistic vision: “when I got the job one of the first things we talked about was that we wanted to create this fairly exotic feeling for the show”. As the program used Australian actors well known to Australian audiences, and a relatively familiar range of characters (centred around two brothers, Art and Vance, and their relationship since the

---

11 As Donnelly argued, that “pop songs have proven themselves easily assigned as television program themes” (2005: 145), continuing to discuss the use of music by The Smiths, The Who and Portishead in television soundtracks.
12 The song’s full lyrics are available at www.machinetranslations.org/lyrics/happy.htm (accessed 10/08/09).
13 All quotations by Walker, unless otherwise cited, are extracted from telephone interview with Walker by the author, 6 August 2009.
14 Stars such as Susie Porter, well known for her roles in TV series such as RAN: Remote Area Nurse, East West 101, features such as Little Fish (Rowan Woods, 2005) and international productions, and Richard Roxburgh who starred in Moulin Rouge! (Baz Lurhmann, 2001) and many television productions.
death of their mother), the show’s location was key to achieving this ‘exotic’ sense. As Walker continued,

_The two main elements are the cinematography… capturing the landscape of Northern New South Wales which is a very striking and beautiful part of the world, and then the music as well, to… give it this sense of the exotic but also… to signal to people that this show’s a little bit different to your average drama in terms of what happens in it, and the settings and so forth._

Walker’s emphasis on the interplay between music with a “sense of the exotic” and the program’s “striking” cinematography demonstrates how place was constructed within the series, a place that would be called Broken Bay within the program’s diegetic world but that was modelled on shooting locations in and around Byron Bay.\(^{15}\) In order to write music to fulfil this production brief, Walker relocated to Byron Bay to observe the local music scene. During this time he observed,

_Byron Bay’s a really complicated place and I think the music reflects that. There are things about Byron Bay culture that are really tokenistic… But then there’s a more sophisticated element as well and you’ve got layers and layers from there. Even things like the surf community, there’s an aspect of it that’s totally consumer culture, and then there’s an aspect of it that’s totally counter-cultural and underground and all those things collide up there._

Most telling here is Walker’s acknowledgement of Byron Bay as a place that is culturally heterogeneous. His description of a place where things ‘collide’ provides a useful way of considering the range of music performed at Byron, music that is experienced often as part of the international festivals held there, including the East Coast Blues and Roots Festival and mainstream rock and pop oriented Splendour in the Grass, as well as the smaller community events such as the Byron Bay Arts and Music Festival. However the word ‘collision’ also provides a framework to consider how Walker created music for the show. Walker indicated that his approach was unusual in the television soundtrack industry, “for me it’s great because I don’t have to… do sort of boring blues soundtracks. I can explore some interesting musical terrain on this show and I think that’s... ended up being a good thing”. This comment is consistent with Donnelly’s description of the almost uniform use of incidental music is British soap operas, whereby music that is generically similar is used in a number of similar types of programs (2005: 115-8). Walker’s relief at being able to move away from such conventional soundtrack composition and explore his own music making while writing for _East of Everything_ is something I will explore below, as well as his claim about the influence of being on location while writing, “it’s been really important to be up there [in Byron Bay] and to sort of let the ambience of the place soak in a bit, and I think you can really hear that in the music”.

---

\(^{15}\) There is an actual Broken Bay in New South Wales about 50kms north of Sydney, however, as indicated by the show’s producers, the Broken Bay in _East of Everything_ is fictional. As producers Deborah Cox and Roger Monk explained just prior to the show’s first broadcast, “[East of Everything] is not a documentary and [creating a fictional town] does buffer you - you can take more liberties… We didn’t want the audience thinking ‘that must be a real councillor or a real property developer’ - they’re all fictional” (Cox and Monk quoted in Munro, 2008: 3). Byron Bay was also renamed Broken Bay out of respect for the customs of local aboriginal people in the shooting location. As declared in each episode’s credits, “Out of respect for the traditional owners, the Arakwal, no sites of spiritual significance have been referred to or depicted.”
Walker’s connection to place is highlighted when he makes a performance cameo in episode five of the series. Appearing as a local songwriter in a bar performing his song ‘Don’t Give Up on Me Just Yet’, Walker features during the scene in which Eve (Susie Porter) and Lara (Leah Vandenberg) talk about their relationship experiences with Art (Richard Roxburgh). The music begins by providing a diegetic background for the conversation in the bar, and continues to play non-diegetically as the shot moves to different characters and locations. As the performance of the song continues, we see Art and Josh (Craig Stott) camped under the Broken Bay sky and they appear to be playing along with Walker on their battered acoustic guitars. Finally we see Dale (Tom Budge) sitting alone in his caravan while also apparently playing along with the song. In this way Walker is not only seen performing in Broken Bay but his music seems to travel across the imagined region as the characters in their various locations appear to play along with him. Here music is used to directly connect the characters and different narrative arcs of the story.

A Northern NSW Sound?

In Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place (2003) Connell and Gibson provide a comprehensive examination of the relationship between popular music and place. Byron Bay features in the book as a prominent case study, a place that has,

become mythical in Australia as a site of ‘alternative culture’, supplemented in recent waves of counter-urbanisation that have brought many former urban residents to the area searching for natural beauty, sub-tropical beauty and the ‘creative’ arts scene. (2003: 261)

Gibson continued to explore Byron’s cultural history, and particularly its musical history, in subsequent studies. In a more recent article he argues for the use of the term ‘region’ when considering Byron and its surrounds,

‘Region’ is a word used to describe both areas large and small, from a sub-national or sub-state area through to the multinational. In Australia, the ‘region’ often, but not always, refers to a sub-state level geographical area containing patchworks of towns, villages, rural and ‘wilderness’ areas. (2009: 62)

Gibson acknowledges some key problems with the idea of region, particularly noting that, “there are official boundary definitions for Australian regions in statistical and economic discourses... [yet] at other times ‘regions’ are popularly constructed in the media and cultural discourse” (ibid), however, he persists with the term as a way of attempting to articulate the diversity of Byron Bay and its surrounds. Most important for Gibson is how region is performed rather than how it is constructed discursively, and he acknowledges that he presents “two sometimes contradictory, yet not inconsistent storylines” (ibid) of the Far North Coast region that directly engage music and place. Writing about music in the area over the last twenty years, Gibson concludes,

There is not ‘regional music’ of the Far North Coast, no single regional ‘sound’; but there is an active set of technological, social and economic networks through which regional music is performed, ‘fixed’ in relational space, and yet always made geographically fluid. (2009: 78)
Gibson’s identification of Byron Bay’s relationship with networks of music provides an appropriate frame to consider the pre-existing music that was used in *East of Everything*. The music featured in the program, which includes folk, pop, rock and even Hawaiian and Asian-inflected song material, was considered to be broadly representative of the musical and ideological traditions of Byron Bay. Stylistically these artists may appear to have little in common, however Walker and the production team’s observation of these musicians in the local Byron Bay music scene qualified them for inclusion. As Jon Stratton noted, while there are often problems attributing “a particular sound and/or lyric and a certain geographical location” (2007: 377), a ‘sense of place’ can still be achieved in an examination of the relationship between music and place by focusing on the “cultural experiences” musicians express in their music (2007: 378).

Connell and Gibson emphasise that “the town [of Byron Bay] has sustained a considerable amount of musical production, far from other Australian rural centres” (2003: 261), a reputation that the producers of *East of Everything* utilised when creating the program. Walker explained that artists based in the Northern NSW area were given priority on the program’s soundtrack, a strategy employed to help create a sense of authenticity in the depiction of place within the program’s diegesis while also providing a platform for the musicians in more general terms:

... we [the production team] worked with lots of local people in terms of getting stuff for the soundtrack and also in terms of helping them get their songs onto the show as performers in their own right.

Artists included in the first series and as part of the series soundtrack CD included Azo Bell, Sara Tindley, Juzzie Smith, King Curly, Andrew Kidman and Jesse Younan, all of whom were at the time signed to local company Vitamin Records and Distribution, a company that promotes itself as “aim[ing] to break the barrier between record labels, record stores, the artist, and the fan by increasing the flow of communication and personal contact” and, according to the ABC, “provid[es] a rich stream of talent from Byron and the surrounds”. In using local artists featured on a local record label, *East of Everything*’s producers are linking music and place by utilising already established musical ties to the area. Thus, again, music and its relationship to place is utilised as a way to engage audiences, as the compilation soundtrack CD acts as a marketing tool to promote the television series.

Pre-existing music by Byron Bay related artists was chosen to highlight key points in *East of Everything*’s storyline with relation to place. For example, Jesse Younan’s songs ‘Forever’ and ‘Queeny’, recorded near Byron Bay and released by Vitamin Records, were featured to suggest a type of spirituality associated with Byron Bay, what Gibson describes as the “distinct cultural ambience” (2009: 63) of the region. In episode 5, ‘Queeny’ accompanies a scene where Bev (Valerie Bader)

---

16 See also Hannan (2003) for more about the musical landscape of the Northern NSW region.
18 Vitamin Records is based in Mullumbimby, about 20 minutes from Byron Bay.
21 For more details see the description of an upcoming film being made about Younan’s recording session in Byron,
participates in a ceremony with Broken Bay Aboriginal elders. This simple love song features only acoustic guitar and a husky male vocal that bears no specific sonic references to any particular place, and it provides a sonic contrast to the points in the story set near the river in Broken Bay. In previous episodes we have seen Bev, while at the river, attempt to contact her neighbours, some Aboriginal elders of the region. However, the elders remain silent, apparently angry with Bev because of a suicide attempt she made in the lake, an act they considered disrespectful to the land. The scene in episode five is different, as we see Bev and the elders congregate and begin to talk. As the opening lyrics of the song begin, “Come sit by me, my love, and tell me your troubles / come sit by me my sweet and I’ll sing you a lullaby”, a reconciliation is realised as the elders lead Bev though a healing process at the water's edge. The scene tells its story without dialogue or other sound, thus leaving the song to provide a commentary for the ceremony while also adhering to the production’s commitment to respecting the real life spiritual significance of the shooting location. In this scene music – rather than dialogue – has helped to indicate the uniqueness of place.

Azo Bell’s music also imbues *East of Everything* with a sense of the significance of place in the NSW Far North Coast Region. A specialist ukulele player based in Byron Bay, Bell has written and recorded much of his music in the region and, as such, his music has been chosen to signify Northern NSW. Bell’s ukulele instrumental ‘Long Road’ plays in Episode One as Art leaves his brother and returns to their mother’s handmade monument facing the water, digging through the rocks to reveal an inscription he’d made earlier. ‘Long Road’ continues as we see Art running into the water and taking his first swim since he has returned to the Australia (and the hippie resort owned by his mother) after six years living abroad, underlining the relationship between landscape and music as the character literally dives back into the water (and into his former life) in Broken Bay. Bell’s music indicates a place that is uncomplicated and familiar, a theme that runs throughout the series as Art’s character is developed, while also demonstrating the diversity of experience that is often associated with Byron Bay. The choice of instrument for this soundtrack cue evokes a sense of unfamiliarity and place almost immediately for a western viewer. The Ukulele has been widely employed internationally by a variety of musical traditions, yet remains somewhat unusual in comparison with musical instrumentation more often used in television soundtracks based on pop, rock and western art arrangements (Donnelly, 2005), so much so that it has often been used to depict a distinct (if not at times crudely generalised) sense of otherness. By these means, the sound of the ukulele itself draws the viewer’s attention to the drama’s somewhat exotic location.

**Going ‘Soul Surfing’**

Music is used in *East of Everything* to highlight a predominant beach culture, a culture that creates another parallel between the actual Byron Bay and the

---

23 According to Aboriginal tribal boundaries, Byron Bay is in Bundjalung (Bunjellung) country, which reaches from the northern bank of the Clarence River to Richmond River and inland to Tabulam and Baryugil.

24 Bell has played solo and in a variety of groups in and around Byron, and is often described as part of the Byron Bay musical landscape. See for example the description of his band, The Blue Hulas. As the band emphasise on their website, “Byron Bay’s original and only Aloha/Hawaiian-style band regularly charm listeners from Byron Bay to the Gold Coast & beyond” (www.bluehulas.com, accessed 25/8/09).


26 For example see Slobin’s description of the methodologies of film score artist Max Steiner, who equated Ukulele with any need to produce “Hawaiian-inflected score for the main title” (Slobin, 2008: 6).
fictional Broken Bay. Within the show, the beach is represented as a stable and unifying location, a place where the characters, both local residents and visitors to Broken Bay, are shown to be (relatively) at peace. Beyond these general associations of wellbeing, the show draws on the Far North NSW region’s alternative culture as it was established particularly with the Nimbin Aquarius Festival in 1973. Like the town of Nimbin (which is located inland of Byron Bay in Far North NSW), Byron Bay was established during the 1970s as a desirable destination to accommodate people with “the trend toward ‘dropping out’ – escaping the capital cities in order to migrate to the North Coast – [and as such it] attracted permaculture enthusiasts, surfing subcultures, artists, musicians and large numbers of itinerant unemployed young people” (Gibson and Connell, 2003: 170). This history is described throughout *East of Everything* with dialogue but it is through music that an audience of a certain age was expected to engage with this nostalgic depiction of place and cultural moment.

In the final scene of the first episode G. Wayne Thomas’ ‘Morning Of The Earth’ is played almost in full. The song, which was the theme for the 1972 surfing film of the same name (directed by Albert Falzon), serves as an immediate musical signifier of a particular type of relationship between surfing and broader Australian beach culture. As Beattie (2001) argued of the film, *Morning of the Earth* had “the ability to effectively represent the emergent soul surfing lifestyle in a ‘psychedelic’ style that resonated with the content” (2001: 339), a representation that Australian viewers now in their 40s, 50s and 60s would likely recognise. This use of music is an example of Donnelly’s description of using “popular music as a vernacular, with historical as well as significatory and musical connotations” (2005: 146) to communicate to television audiences, a practice that is also well established in film. As Shumway (1999) described with reference to a number of films, including *The Big Chill* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1983), popular music is used to create a nostalgic tie-in between audiences and song. Shumway argued that screen producers use music in this way to engage audiences, with “the assumption that the audience will recognize the artist, the song, or, at the minimum, a familiar style” (Shumway, 1999: 37). For audiences who would remember its original release particularly, ‘Morning of the Earth’ would also serve the *East of Everything*’s producers as a tie-in between new and old cultural artefacts.

As a film *Morning Of The Earth* is symbolic of a particular time and culture in Australian history although it depicts an attitude towards surf culture that was quite unlike its international counterparts. As Paul Byrnes articulated,

*Part of the attraction of the film is the way that director Albert Falzon creates a romantic mythology around the act of surfing. ‘Soul surfing’ (as opposed to competitive surfing) was not a new concept, or debate, but *Morning of the Earth* offered a kind of visual manifesto for its would-be followers... The songs, by both popular and more underground musicians,*

---

27 For example, during Art’s homecoming and eventual acceptance of Broken Bay, in episode one he finds Edgar (Glenn Shea) on the beach, and the men comment about their own surfing, as well as their teenaged sons and their relationships to the water. Rather than competing in the surf, here it is shown to be a way of re-establishing the bonds of father and son. Similarly, the romance between Art and Eve is developed as they talk on the beach and arrange to make a date in episode 2.

28 In episode 6 Art’s character details the history of Broken Bay as part of a hearing with the local council in an attempt to have his mother’s property, the Far Out East, heritage listed. Here Art argued that Broken Bay was a place where many different types of people lived over time, from loggers in the 1880s to banana, pig and dairy farmers in the early twentieth century to the 1970s people who “like my parents.... [were] hippies, surfies and lost souls [who] mingled with the locals because they all felt the pull of this very special part of the earth”.
underlined the ethos with lyrics about dropping out and following your desires.29

Key to the process of ‘soul surfing’ was a rejection of competitiveness in surfing that had come to be associated with the sport during its rise in popularity in the 1970s. During East of Everything several types of ‘soul surfing’ occur, as a number of characters re-evaluate their previous ideologies and visit the beach for inspiration.30 Most notably, ‘Morning of the Earth’ provides a musical theme for the closing sequences of episode 6 in which we see the reprise of Art’s mother’s wishes expressed via her Will and the reconciliation between Art and Vance, and Art and Josh.

The song begins the series as Art, Josh and Vance (Tom Long) come together to sprinkle their mother’s/grandmother’s ashes over the water. The scene is interspersed with shots of various Broken Bay community members taking to the surf on boards, and concludes with the men releasing the ashes. As the ceremony of releasing the ashes begins, ‘Morning of the Earth’ remains at a constant volume as the dialogue continues, with the song’s lyrics eventually adding to the series theme of conflict resolution. The guitar and string instrumental introduction of the song accompanies the reading of the dead woman’s letter by her grandson Josh, and the lyrics begin just as the reading ends. As Josh reads “p.s. no more fighting” (a direction from the dead woman to her sons and grandson), the first line of ‘Morning of the Earth’ – “The forces of the universe and elements of space” – emphasises the theme of unity. This relationship between the characters’ dialogue and the song continues as the scene progresses. The men on the rock release the ashes as the song’s backing vocals call ‘Halleluiah’. The climatic lyric to the song’s chorus, “It was the morning of the Earth”, sounds and the camera moves high above the men to a wide shot of the water and the rocks and finally the credits, providing a conclusion to the first season and a resolution of much of the conflict during that season. The credits roll as the camera zooms out, the men appear in longer shots, overtaken by imagery of Bryon/Broken Bay. The scene thus evokes Gibson’s description of Byron as “beach-orientated, tourist-friendly and marketable” (2009: 63). As such, the first series concludes as it began, with an emphasis on the importance of place as highlighted by music in relation to image.

Conclusion

In addition to facilitating the story’s narrative, music is used in East of Everything to create a clear parallel between a fictional Broken Bay and the show’s shooting location, Byron Bay. This relationship helped to promote industry in Byron Bay, a key factor in the financing of the program, but also served as an effective television device to attract a target audience. Music both sourced from, and inspired by, the NSW Far North Coast region was fundamental to creating the fictional Broken Bay, the ‘peculiar place’ central to the narrative within East of Everything and thus central to creating a drama that would capture the interest of its target audience.

Towards the end of the first series’ last episode Art and his family attend a court hearing to argue the historical significance of Broken Bay. Presenting a narrative that Australian viewers may recognise as similar to Byron Bay, Art’s description is idealistic and highly stylised, an example of a “longed-for performative utopia”

30 See image of Art walking on the beach on the Screen Sound journal cover for this issue (courtesy of ….).
like those Billingham described in his study of television drama and place. Art described Broken Bay as a “very particular place, something that the traditional owners have always understood but that some of us still seem to be struggling to come to terms with”. This monologue tied together many of the histories of Byron Bay that were explored during the series. While these descriptions of place are offered expressly through dialogue in the series’ finale, music provided a powerful evocation of place throughout the preceding episodes.

In *East of Everything* music is used to mark place deliberately, creating general ‘feelings’ of Broken Bay as a town with a surfing and alternative lifestyle culture while also using specific songs and artists to ensure that the drama’s fictional location relates to the actual shooting locale. By commissioning new musical work for the drama as well as utilising existing material, the producers of *East of Everything* feature music as a key storytelling device in the contemporary Australian drama, with audiences able to engage with music from a variety of positions. For older audiences, the use of music such as ‘Morning of the Earth’ functions on a nostalgic level; yet younger and international audiences may also engage with the way music has been chosen to evoke the drama’s main themes of homecoming and family, as well as spirituality tied to landscape. Like international TV drama productions that use music to evoke and create a sense of place, in *East of Everything* Australian musicians and songs have been chosen specifically to create a system of sonic references that emphasise place and its importance.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the referees of this journal for their patience, in depth analysis and insightful suggestions when considering the drafts of this article. The combination of industry and scholarly advice was extremely useful and highly appreciated.

**Bibliography**


Abstract

Brian May (1934–1997) was a pioneer of the Australian feature film revival period. He was one of the most prolific composers in this period, writing the scores for 22 Australian feature films (from 1975 to 1994), in addition to producing music for Australian television projects and a number of American feature film scores and television series. Brian May bequeathed his collection of music manuscripts and other related items to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. This article outlines the contents of this collection, the gaps in the collection and problems associated with sorting the many thousands of items. It makes a case for the national heritage significance of the collection and its value as a resource for the research of Australian screen music.

Keywords

Brian May, screen composition, music manuscripts, archival research, national heritage

Introduction

Brian May was a major contributor to the Australian feature film revival period that began in the late 1960s. Until his untimely death in 1997, May was one of the nation’s most prolific composers, writing the scores for 22 Australian feature films, in addition to producing music for Australian television projects and a number of feature film scores and television series produced in the United States of America (USA). In the Australian feature film score stakes his output is only rivalled by Peter Best (24 scores) and Bruce Smeaton (24 scores). Born in 1934, Brian May studied piano, violin and conducting at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide and, after working for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) as a conductor of the Adelaide Big Band (and also occasionally for the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra), he took on the musical directorship of the ABC’s Melbourne Showband in 1969 (Magee, 1996). May achieved major success with his arrangement for the Melbourne Showband of George Dreyfus’s theme for the television series Rush (Image Records, 1974) which reached No 5 in the Australian national singles charts in December 1974. Apart from Rush he worked as a composer and arranger on other ABC television shows such as Bellbird and Countdown. May’s first feature film score was for the sex comedy The True Story of Eskimo Nell (Richard Franklin, 1975) which began his association with Richard Franklin (a young director who had been mentored by Alfred Hitchcock). It was May’s Herrmannesque score for Patrick
(Richard Franklin, 1978) that established his reputation in the horror genre and ultimately led to his winning the scoring assignment for *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and its sequel *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981). May won the 1979 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for best original score for *Mad Max*. Although his international reputation was growing he was not considered high-profile enough to score the big-budget *Psycho II* (1983), although director Richard Franklin originally had him in mind for this project (MacLean, 1997). May suffered a similar slight when the score for *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985) was contracted to Maurice Jarre. Despite these setbacks, May ended his screen career in Hollywood scoring the last of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, *Freddie’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Rachel Talalay, 1991), as well as another horror film *Dr. Giggles* (Manny Coto, 1992) and a television series titled *Blind Side* (Geoff Murphy, 1993).

Later in his career, Brian May developed a strong interest in the education of screen composers. In the early 1990s he taught a postgraduate course in screen composition at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University, Australia. As a measure of Brian May’s commitment to educating screen composers, a generous scholarship was established under his Will to enable gifted Australian screen composers to study film scoring in the USA. The Brian May Scholarship was first awarded in 2003 and the intention of the Trustees is to offer it every two years.

Brian May bequeathed his collection of music manuscripts and other related items to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. At the time of his sudden death in 1997, May was about to begin teaching screen composition at QUT and for some time prior to that had played an industry consultative role in the music program at QUT.

In 2007, QUT’s Professor Andy Arthurs invited the author to make an assessment of the vast amount of manuscript material that Brian May had left to QUT. I spent from November 26 to December 5, 2007, undertaking an initial sorting of the collection and in 2010 spent three months identifying and listing all the collected items and developing a plan for producing research publications. It is worth mentioning that I am not trained as an archivist, although as a musicologist I have worked with similarly large volumes of music manuscripts and related documents to research my critical biography of Peter Sculthorpe (Hannan, 1982). In the case of the Brian May Collection I also bring specialist knowledge of screen composition to the task.

The Brian May Collection

The material bequeathed to the QUT is held in the Music and Sound building of the Faculty of Creative Industries. The material was donated in an unordered fashion in cardboard boxes. It can be divided into eight different categories: musical equipment; videotapes; professional library (books); professional library (music scores); teaching materials; letters, financial and legal documents; commercial recordings and audio tapes; and music manuscripts. More detailed description of contents of these eight categories is given below. The music manuscripts will be

---

1 May’s scores for his two *Mad Max* films are discussed in Harley (1998) and Coyle (2004).
2 Information about this Scholarship is available at the following URL: http://www.brianmayscholarship.org/
3 He was, for example, an industry representative on the panel that appointed Andy Arthurs as Associate Professor and Head of Music at QUT in August 1996.
discussed last. They form the bulk of the collection and are of most significance to the research concerns of *Screen Sound*.

(1) All Brian May’s music equipment which originally formed part of his audio production and synchronisation studio plus a white baby grand piano. Operation manuals for all the items of equipment are also included. Electronic music and audio equipment dates very quickly so the items in this category (with the exception of the piano) are of little use now to the music and sound division of QUT for the purpose of teaching electronic music or audio production. However the equipment provides a snapshot of the music and synchronisation technologies typically used by screen composers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The studio could easily be reassembled (and even made operational) as a museum installation.

![Figure 1: Brian May in his studio (image courtesy of Brian May Trust).](image)

(2) Six large boxes of videotapes in various tape formats, including time-coded versions of many of the film and television projects on which Brian May worked. These may be matched to the scores and other materials detailed below.

(3) A library of several hundred books, the titles focusing on music composition techniques, music theory, orchestration, arranging, harmony, counterpoint, improvisation, film music theory and practice, and musicological studies of romantic and contemporary composers. Most of these texts are still readily available to purchase, but the titles provide a valuable insight into the kinds of books that informed May’s compositional practice.

(4) A library of about 200 orchestral, chamber, choral and piano scores mostly covering nineteenth and twentieth century compositional practices. European ‘romantic’ composers who were influential on Hollywood screen music, such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Anton Bruckner, and Ernest Bloch are well represented, but the library also includes multiple scores by twentieth century modernist composers such as Béla Bartók, Igor Stravinsky and Witold Lutosławski. It should be noted that all composers, but

---

4 There are also videotapes of programs that May dubbed from television, notably golfing programs. May was a keen golfer and the QUT collection also includes golfing memorabilia and a number of golfing trophies that Brian May won.
particularly screen composers (who are often asked to write music simulating another composer’s idiom), analyse the scores of other composers in detail in order to understand the intricacies of compositional technique, so May’s score library collection may provide insights into his stylistic and technical development as a composer and orchestrator.

(5) A collection of teaching materials relating to screen composition including lecture notes, handouts, publicity material and some correspondence. These materials date from May’s teaching contract in the early 1990s with the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University. There is a focus in this curriculum material on illustrating the film scoring techniques of Bernard Herrmann, particularly the score to Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Great attention is also given to Brian May’s own scores as a means to demonstrate how image track is set to music. May takes advantage of the rich materials at his disposal: time-coded video without music, cue sheets deriving from spotting sessions, sketches of cues for particular scenes, the fleshed-out realisation of cues in orchestrated scores and the final versions of music cues recorded and dubbed to picture. May’s notes for his postgraduate course may be assembled and edited into a textbook that would be valuable in illustrating a particular slant on how to go about writing music for film.

(6) A small selection of correspondence, financial and legal documents and press clippings. Unfortunately most of the financial and legal documents that Brian May would have had in his business office files (such as screen composition contracts and project budgets) have not been included in the bequeathed collection. In addition May appears not to have made copies of letters that he sent to business associates, friends or acquaintances, and he appears to have kept very little of the business and personal correspondence that he would have received. Although May collected some press material about his work, there are surprisingly very few items included in the collection considering the length and prominence of his career. The lack of material in these areas poses a serious problem for compiling a comprehensive biographical account of May’s life and career. Of course these kinds of documents might be available in other collections held by a member or members of Brian May’s family, although sources of such relevant documents are yet to be identified.

(7) A small number of commercial vinyl recordings and reel-to-reel recordings of Brian May’s screen music and band music. Analogue recordings will need to be carefully handled and digitally restored and archived for these to be useful in the future.

(8) A very large collection of music manuscripts covering the bulk of the screen music projects that May worked on. The collection of music manuscripts is the centerpiece of the collection. It can basically be divided into two categories. The first of these is mostly projects for which no material other than the orchestrated film scores survives. Generally this material was bundled in a way that made it easy to identify which projects the manuscripts were associated with.

In this first category fully orchestrated sets of cues were identified for the following feature films: Patrick (Richard Franklin, 1978), Mad Max, Thirst (Rod Hardy, 1979), The Survivor (David Hemmings, 1980), Harlequin (Simon Wincer, 1980), Nightmares (John Lamond, 1980), Gallipoli (Peter Weir, 1981), Roadgames (Richard Franklin, 1981), A Dangerous Summer (Quentin Masters, 1981), Breakfast in Paris (John Lamond, 1981), Slice of Life (John Lamond, 1982), and Turkey Shoot (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1982). In addition there are orchestrated sets of cues for the

For all these projects it was possible to make a list of all the music cues, which are traditionally numbered in order of appearance in a film. In doing this, potentially missing elements can be identified. For example the cue inventory for *Mad Max* consisted of the orchestrated cues labelled with a typical numbering system: MMI, MM2, MM3, MM5, etc.

Of particular interest is the fact that cues MM4, MM18, and cues MM24 to MM34 are missing, as are pages 1-4 of cue MM23B. It could be that the manuscripts for these missing cues and pages have been lost, or that they were discarded because they were not used, or even that an eccentric numbering system had been adopted. This number may relate to an original spotting session between composer, director and/or producer. In order to gain some insight into this situation it would be necessary to check the individual manuscripts of the cues against the soundtrack of the film. It is common for cues to be written and recorded but eventually not used on a film soundtrack.

The score for *Mad Max 2: Road Warrior* was also part of this category but unfortunately the orchestrated cues for this film were damaged when a flash flood inundated the building where May was storing his manuscripts. Most of the pages of this score are fused together and there is badly decaying mouldy paper around the edges. It may be possible for the individual pages of the score to be saved, at least in part, by manuscript restoration experts. Luckily screen composers and orchestrators work almost entirely in pencil. If these pages had been written in ink the notes would have become illegible. Fortunately this is the only score in the whole collection adversely affected by water damage.

The second category is for screen music projects for which the available manuscript material is far more extensive, usually consisting of fully orchestrated scores, short scores, compositional sketches, and cue sheets. This category poses by far the greatest archival challenge, as it was not bundled in any coherent way. Rather, the material in this category was dispersed in an unruly manner throughout the forty or so boxes in which the collection was delivered to QUT.


Sorting the Screen Music Collection
In working with the Brian May Collection, most of my time was spent trying to identify which screen project a particular piece of music manuscript (either an orchestrated cue, a short score of a cue, or a musical sketch) was related to. The scale of this task is worth describing because it raises issues related to the role of the archivist. Each of these 22 projects involves up to one thousand pieces of music manuscript paper. When the individual pages of music manuscript of any one screen music project were eventually stacked in a single pile, the height of the stack ranged between 15 centimetres and 25 centimetres. Because of the large number of pages and the consistency in the brands, formats, colours and sizes of the manuscript paper employed, it was necessary to devise a workable strategy to sort the material. Film music cues are often titled using the name(s) of the character or characters who feature(s) in the scene associated with the cue. Knowing this I created a database of the names of all the characters in each of the films and television series that Brian May worked on. This was not a foolproof system since many of the projects involved characters with the same names (for example there is a Jake in Blind Side and in East of Eden and a Jennifer in Blood Moon, Dr Giggles and Turkey Shoot).

Although I managed to identify most of the many thousands of items, a significant number of items (around 2% of the total number of items) remain unidentified (although with further work particularly involving thematic identification this amount may be significantly reduced).

In addition to screen score items there were also significant amounts of manuscript material relating to Brian May’s other career as an arranger, musical director and conductor, for example, May was involved in a major concert for the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988. There are extensive manuscripts of song arrangements and other documentation relating to this event. May also conducted concerts that included the main title themes from his screen projects. There are scores of theme medleys associated with these concerts.

For the 23 projects in the second category, the presence of different versions of cue sheets, different sketches for particular cues, as well as short scores and orchestrated scores allows the screen music researcher to follow the creative process of screen composition. May’s sketches typically consist of a single melody line with chord symbols, dialogue cues and timings scribbled above the staff. The short scores follow the standard practice of setting out the music neatly on four staves with detailed indications of the orchestration indicated. This short score is then used as the basis for the fully orchestrated score.

One of the next tasks in the assessment of the collection is to identify any orchestrators for particular projects. Like many screen composers, May preferred to do his own orchestrations (Magee, 1996: 178) but the extremely short deadlines for some of his screen projects sometimes made this impractical. Orchestrators with credits on May’s projects include Fred Steiner (for Cloak and Dagger), Maurie Sheldon and Michael Linn (on Freddie’s Dead: The Final Nightmare) but there may be other uncredited orchestrators who might be detected or identified by their different musical handwriting. The Australian screen composer Nerida Tyson-Chew, for example, told me in an interview (Hannan 2008) that she worked for Brian May as an apprentice on some of his later projects, confessing that she had some difficulty (because of her classical music composition background) understanding the complex jazz chord symbols that May used in his sketches. This suggests that one of her assignments was turning May’s sketches into short score.
Gaps in the Collection

There are some screen projects that Brian May is known to have worked on, but for which there are no manuscripts or other documents in the collection. There appears to be no manuscript material in the collection for the following feature films: *Innocent Prey* (Colin Eggleston, 1984) and *Snapshot* (Simon Wincer, 1978). Similarly there is no manuscript material related to these television series: *Bellbird* (Vernon, 1967-77), *Catspaw* (John Gauci, Michael Ludbrook and David Zweek, 1978), *New Wave* (Rob Weekes, 1974), *Countdown* (Walter Boston and Ted Emery, 1974), *The Sentimental Bloke* (Alan Burke, 1976), *Deadline* (Arch Nicholson, 1982), and *Carson’s Law* (Terry Stapleton [creator], 1983).

This is not to suggest that the material is lost. Much of the television work (and some features) that May did early in his career was as an employee of the ABC. The music manuscripts and other documents relating to May’s contributions to these projects may well be found in the National Archives in Chester Hill (Sydney) which holds music scores for the Melbourne Showband covering the years when May was its musical director.5

Conclusion: The Significance of the Brian May Collection

The manuscripts in the Brian May Collection are of considerable heritage value in relation to the history of film production in Australia. Certainly there is nothing like this collection held by any public institution. The National Library of Australia (NLA) has made significant progress in preserving the manuscripts and private papers of Australian concert composers such as Peter Sculthorpe and Keith Humble (both of whom, it should be said, have accumulated significant screen music credits) but has not yet initiated a similar project for career screen composers. In Australia interest in the preservation of feature film and television music remains undeveloped compared to the United States where the Film Music Society has taken on a preservation mission following news reports in the 1970s that major film studios were dumping film score manuscripts as landfill.6 The notable exception in Australia is the preservation of the hundreds of scores of documentary films made by the Commonwealth Film Unit (later Film Australia). These are held in the National Archives.

The work that I have been doing and will continue to do on the Brian May collection will prepare the music manuscripts and personal papers part of the collection for possible inclusion in a major national collection such as the NLA.7 In order for an institution like the NLA to accept such a large collection of papers as this, extensive preliminary work needs to be done by an expert so that all items in the collection (down to individual pieces of music manuscript) can be correctly identified. This kind of work was done, for example, by John Whiteoak on the *Music Scores and Papers of Keith Humble* (MS 9402, NLA) and by Adrienne Levenson on the *Papers of Peter Sculthorpe* (MS 9676, NLA) before they could be accepted by the

5 Email correspondence with Susan Kennedy (Records Officer and TRIM Administrator, Technology and Communications Networks, ABC), October 15, 2009.
6 See http://www.filmmusicsociety.org/about/about.html.
7 I have discussed this possibility with the QUT custodians. Any plans for the Collection would be subject to negotiations with the Trustees of Brian May’s Will and with his family.
NLA. Significantly a major biographical study of Sculthorpe by Skinner (2007) has drawn extensively on documents in the NLA, and Skinner has done concentrated work on a second volume of the biography as a Harold White Fellow of the NLA in 2007. I mention this particular case because I consider it an excellent example of the facilitation of research through the public availability of ordered collections of personal papers. Once my assessment work of the Brian May Collection is complete, the Collection will become a significant resource for researching screen music in the formative period of the modern Australian film industry. It will allow researchers like myself to carry out detailed case studies\(^8\) of the work of a prominent screen composer and in an area of artistic activity where there are major gaps in the academic literature. These kinds of case studies will help us to build up a solid base of evidence to support a bigger overview reflection on the Australian screen music industry.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank Andy Arthurs and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) for the invitation to work with the Brian May Collection. This article is an outcome of the ARC Discovery Project grant DP0770026 ‘Music production and technology in Australian film: enabling Australian film to embrace innovation’ (2007-2010), held by Rebecca Coyle, Michael Hannan and Philip Hayward.

Bibliography


\(^8\) An example of a detailed case study of film scores in this period of the Australian feature film is Coyle and Hannan (2005).
DOCUMENTING SOUND:
An Interview with Screen Composer Trevor Coleman

Henry Johnson

Abstract

New Zealand composer Trevor Coleman has created over 70 documentary film soundtracks, primarily with Natural History New Zealand. Besides composing for film, Coleman is a pianist and trumpeter, and leader and performer for various jazz fusion bands working in and around Dunedin. The article centres on an interview that covers the composer’s background and compositional process and style.

Keywords

Trevor Coleman, documentary film, composition, New Zealand

Introduction

Over the past decade or so the field of composing for documentary films has been augmented by the highly acclaimed work of prolific composer Trevor Coleman (b. 1959). Born and based in the city of Dunedin, located in the south of New Zealand’s South Island, Coleman has now been nominated three times for an Emmy award in recognition of his contribution to composing for documentary films. This article features an interview with Coleman that focuses on his compositional background, process and style.

Since 2000, Coleman has composed or produced over 70 documentary film soundtracks working primarily with Natural History New Zealand (NHNZ). As well as composing for film, Coleman is well known as a pianist and trumpeter, and leader and member of various jazz-fusion bands working in and around Dunedin. While originally trained as a classical pianist and later as a jazz musician, Coleman completed his studies in composition at the University of Otago, and then went to Berklee College of Music in the United States of America (US) to study film scoring. For part of the 1980s and 1990s he lived in Germany, working as a composer, musical director and performer. Over the course of his career, Coleman has collaborated with and led a number of jazz-fusion and contemporary jazz groups exploring music from various cultures. Influences on his approach are widespread.

---

1 NHNZ is a world leader of documentary films ranging from nature to science. It produces films for an international audience, collaborating with broadcasters that include Animal Planet, BSkyB, Discovery Channel, France 5, HGTV, National Geographic, NHK and TLC. The company is owned by Fox Television Studios. See http://www.nhnz.tv.

2 See a history of this college at: http://www.berklee.edu/about/history.html.
and described on his website as follows: “Finding inspiration in diversity, he is a member of a new generation of eclectic composers who is fluent in the languages of jazz, classical, contemporary, electronic and world music, often described as refreshingly unique.”

Coleman’s work has been consumed by a global audience, screening in Japan through NHK (Japan), on the Discovery channel (US), and National Geographic channel (US). He records and performs widely and prolifically mainly in New Zealand. In addition, Coleman’s scores have been nominated for several awards: in 2006 his two soundtracks for high-definition Equator: Power of an Ocean (for NHK) and Buggin with Ruud: Madagaskar (for Discovery; Animal Planet) received Emmy Award Nominations for Best Music and Sound; in 2007, his Equator: Rivers of the Sun (for NHK) attracted an Emmy Award Nomination for Best Music and Sound; and in the same year his soundtrack to Equator: Challenge of Change (for NHK) was in the final round of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival for Best Original Music Score.

The following interview with Trevor Coleman has the single aim of allowing the composer to talk about his work from three perspectives: first, background – why music? why composition?; second, compositional process; and third, compositional style. These perspectives overlap and interrelate. The semi-structured interview with open questions was conducted in Coleman’s home in Dunedin, and was recorded over an hour, then transcribed and edited. The final version was returned to Coleman to confirm that it was an accurate interview record and to approve publication of the interview and introduction. What follows is part of a story of a long and lasting engagement with sound and film, a perspective of one moment in the creative life of a New Zealand film composer whose work has been screened to a global audience.

---


Coleman’s Background

Henry Johnson (henceforth HJ): Can you tell me about your background in music? Why music? Why composition?

Trevor Coleman (henceforth TC): For me, I have an integrated love of music. You notice that with young kids, they just gravitate towards instruments and try and find the sound and instrument from a young age. I was one of those young kids. Whenever there was a piano or anything that made sound I would go and try and find the sound that I knew was in there, so it’s a very integral part of who I am. As a musician, that’s how I see it – an innate sense of musicality.

HJ: So when did composition come into all of this? I know a lot of your work is in jazz, and jazz sometimes includes composing on the spot, but when did writing music down or recording music come about for you?

TC: My approach has always been quite improvisational. When I was young my approach to learning instruments was always improvisational. Right from a young age I was trying out ideas... until I could write them down. And the first actual recorded piece of mine of a more serious nature that I can remember was from about the age of fifteen. It was a piece for brass band, for the St Kilda Brass Band, here in Dunedin. It was recorded for national radio [when he was 15], and I called it a tone poem ['Novus Deus']. I think I probably worked it out on piano, and I remember walking round at school with a manuscript book in playtimes and in the lunchtimes, with that sort of obsessiveness working on it. A friend of mine was a son of Ashley Heenan [1925-2004], the conductor and composer, and, in Wellington, we went and stayed at his place and I took the score with me. He looked it over and gave me some very valuable comments on it. Fortunately, the St Kilda Brass Band, in those days, they had regular recording sessions with Radio New Zealand, and at least once a year they would have a contract to record a program. So that piece was included in that program.

HJ: Did you learn classical piano?

TC: Yes, I learned classical piano as well. I actually bounced between classical, which I spent a year or two learning, and modern playing techniques. I then went back to classical when I found my limitations of technique and so I went back and forth taking exams up to ATCL [Associate of the Trinity College of Music, London]. At university I didn’t study piano, I studied trumpet; this was my major instrument. It’s almost been a conflicting relationship for many years as I wasn’t sure if I was a pianist or a trumpet player or both, and it’s still a bit strange in a way. I’ve come to terms with it and I’ve realised that both instruments are so unique and so valuable to me, not only as a performer, but as a composer. As a pianist, of course, you can basically be an orchestra, do a lot of work with harmony, rhythm and melody at the same time. But, to have a real innate sense of melody I find having a dedicated melody instrument like the trumpet has given me a real appreciation for the power of melody. And [it’s] also a ticket into many cultures too, because as a pianist you don’t get very far in West Africa trying to lug a piano round but, in one of many places I’ve been, having a trumpet in my pocket has meant that I could play with a lot of different musicians and experience a lot of different cultures as well.

HJ: When did you first compose for film?
TC: As far as I can remember the very first film that I wrote music for was while I was studying in Berklee College in the United States, so after I had finished my degree in classical music here at Otago University, I went on to study at Berklee, and my major there was film composition (they call it film scoring) and jazz music. For my final project I had to record the music... onto the old reel-to-reel machines. That was a dance piece and it was for harp, flute and piano. It was just a small classical ensemble.

HJ: What inspired you to go to Berklee?

TC: I would say predominantly the motivation for going to Berklee College was my new found love of jazz. I really only started studying jazz at the age of 17 or 18, and I went to Berklee when I was 20 with the express intention of deepening my education in jazz music. I presume when I was there you had to nominate a particular major and I had always been interested in music for moving images, so that’s probably what happened. I nominated film scoring as my major.

Compositional Process

HJ: Let’s move onto your compositional process. Could you talk freely about the process that you use? Is there one single process, or might you go about writing for film in different ways according to the film or the context or the music?

TC: I think what you have to be very clear about is that there are really two approaches with film music, and that’s become more and more pronounced in recent times. I will address the first one as being the more traditional one, as in you have a locked set of pictures and you have a discussion about what the music is supposed to do for the scene and you write to that scene. So the architecture of your music has to lock in perfectly with the timing of the pictures. That’s one process.

The other process, which has become much more popular in recent times, is when you’re more likely to write to a brief. The film is about this and that, or has a certain character. We need a set of pieces first of all, almost like demos or sketches of music that happens before the pictures are actually edited. So it’s almost like writing in the dark in a way, or writing to adjectives. For that scenario I would be talking to the director, producer, and looking for these kinds of adjectives; you know, this person has a disturbing wish, or is in the outback, it is absolutely desolate and arid; these sorts of words that I’ll be jotting down, desolate and arid, and I’ll be thinking these will be my templates in a way. I have to be able to sit back and say, ‘is this music desolate and arid?’, or am I getting carried away with the musical process of it, and the intellectual concepts that I’m trying to pursue here. At any one point, if I ask my wife to come into the room and say what it sounds like to her, and she says it sounds like a day at the swimming pool, then I’m kind of off-track.

HJ: So with the latter style of composition you’re writing to words, or adjectives; you’re given a set of concepts. Would you then take it back to the producer and say, here you go, here’s a sketch, what do you think about this?

TC: That’s exactly what happens. It’s so subjective, and so abstract working like that. It’s a very abstract concept and what happy or sad means to one person can
be completely different music to someone else. There’s a certain amount of research, I think, and a certain amount of almost tricks or (sort of) wisdom that you pick up over the years of doing it. Sometimes I ask a producer, well have you got any particular music in mind that you’re thinking of, or something that inspires you at the moment, in order to get close to what that core sound might be. Other factors come into play when you’re working in a commercial field, as opposed to independent filmmakers. For example, if it’s Discovery or National Geographic, there are certain stylistic parameters to keep in mind. If you go too far outside of that, you’ll probably get rejected.

HJ: So you’re given a brief before you see anything?

TC: Yes. The younger editors coming through are so used to actually cutting the pictures to existing music. They tend to prefer to have music to either cut directly to, or at least act as an inspiration – something that can help them have a sense of time. And the various people involved (people who have a say in the matter) want to hear what the finished product might sound like.

But, you know, I’ve heard of producers who go through three or four composers – actually engage them – before they find the right person. Until you’re working in the field, people don’t realise what a particular art it is to write music and what a huge difference it can make from one piece of music to another piece of music; even subtle differences that are conveyed in the particular scene. Directors can be extremely fussy that they are getting exactly the right mood out of the music, providing exactly the right role, and the right function.

HJ: Do you do a few sketches and take them back to the director or producer?

TC: Yes. In the documentary process they tend to be called producer. I’ll need to mostly concentrate on the documentary world, because they [film making and documentary film making] are different worlds, and I’ve had more experience in documentary film scoring.

HJ: So you take the sketches back to the producer and say, “so what do you think of this?” And there’s a negotiation process that goes on. But do you think that helps you, as a composer, get an idea of what the producer actually wants? Do you think it helps to know the concepts in the first instance and then see the images? And you can make changes. Or will you then see the images and keep the sounds as they are?

TC: There’re so many things involved in this. I would have to say I find it helpful to have the second process, to actually not be too fixed on the moving images; to not be too fixed on a particular scene. I find it helpful to work from a wider perspective. Take the project I’m working on at the moment. It’s called Weird Edens [for NHK and Discovery]. It’s a project that’s going to take one year, and it’s a big blue chip series with NHK, with the Japanese broadcasting company, and it’s a follow on from the last series we did, the Equator series. I’m at the very beginning point, which I really enjoy because I’m working far more conceptually and I have the opportunity to write something a little more unique, or fresh, or try and come up with something I haven’t come up with before. One of the briefs that I’ve had for this show, apart from all the discussions we’ve had, is that the executive producer, who has quite a say, was saying basically we need a score that will sound contemporary, and between the years 2011 and 2013.
This is the kind of thinking that goes on within the corporations. It will be mainly broadcast between the years 2011 and 2015. The score can't sound dated, so in a way, you put on your prophecy hat, wizard hat, and try and see in the future, about the sort of sound that will still sound contemporary. Sounding contemporary is also a part of the process.

HJ: Have you ever worked with the concepts, done your sketches, negotiated the process, felt really good about it, and then seen the images and thought, I don't want my music to go to those images? In other words, recompose the music for the images because you didn't feel good about the sounds and images.

TC: In this kind of field that I'm working in, I can make my suggestions, but ultimately the decision comes from other people: from producers, executive producers. If they say that they really like this particular thing, and I think it's mediocre, then I need to find the best way possible to make that still something that I can stand behind. But that quite often happens, in exactly the same way that the opposite also happens.

HJ: Do you ever keep that music for something else?

TC: I do. It's not all lost. The most recent example was working for a shark documentary called Shark Nicole, a great white pointer. I was completely on board with the producer of the show; we were working very closely and he wanted something that was not typical of the Jaws [Steven Spielberg, 1975, original music by John Williams] genre because the science and the approach to this shark film was completely different. It had nothing to do with the shark as an evil eating machine. So we came up with basically chamber music, and very piano driven, quite gentle music. But the executive people, in this case it was National Geographic, they kind of played along, but they weren't sure, and two weeks before I had to deliver the music, they pulled the plug and said no, we can't go this way, we need traditional, cinematic, orchestral dramatic music – not so much the danger sort of 'Jaws' thing, but very traditional giant orchestral things that we were trying to avoid. So I had two weeks to come up with a complete orchestral score, forty minutes worth. This is the sort of thing that happens. It's not always exactly what you would want. You are part of a team, and you're a part of a bigger picture. And so you do need to be a team player.

HJ: As part of the process, could you just mention briefly some of the equipment you use?

TC: My sequencing program, which is the central brains of what I do technically, is Logic. I'm still working with Logic Pro 7. I have worked with this software since the late 1980s. I've grown up with Logic, and all the various plug-ins and samplers that are integrated with Logic, and the sample libraries that you have access to as a composer.

HJ: So the documentary would come on a DVD? Or would you download it or something else?

TC: The documentary is given to me as a QuickTime file. If it’s coming from another part of the world, then I'll download it. If from here then I might get it on DVD. I can synchronise it completely to my sequencer.

HJ: And is everything keyboard-based?
TC: In terms of playing the notes, I do everything from the keyboard. But I do record acoustic instruments as well. You see a trumpet there [in the studio], but I’ll bring in people like guitarist, mandolin players, a violinist, or a soprano sax player. I really like to record vocalists.

HJ: So you record them in here [Coleman’s studio looking out at the beach]?

TC: I do, I have done. They just record straight into Logic. Once I close off everything here, it’s quite quiet. The environment plays a big role. I have good experiences with people coming into this room, and they’ve got the view of the sea, the sun is coming in, and we’re sitting here relaxed, we have a cup of tea, and when we’re ready, we get up and record. It’s not the pressure of an expensive studio, and so we get good performances.

One other thing I didn’t mention is that there is quite a lot of overlap as well. Rather than just start writing from scratch, I will take existing sketches that the editors and producers have already laid into the film, and use that as my basis to start the scoring. I’ll start scoring based upon the ideas that have already been accepted. So that way, I can’t really go wrong from that point on because the music has already been, what we call, ‘signed off’; everybody is happy with the music. At this point now, one term is ‘massaging’, you dive back into the music, and re-compose the music, based upon the ideas, the existing ideas, to the now locked pictures to make it a perfect match.

I would say I have a very improvisational, real-time approach to composition. I don’t so much (almost never) sit down and write one note after another. Anything that I come up with is basically in real-time, and typically that means if I’m working in my studio and I’ve got my sequencer running, after I’ve thought about what I want to do and found a couple of instruments that I’m interested in working with, I just start improvising, and I record everything. Then it’s a process of selection. Ninety, ninety-five percent will be thrown away, but that five to ten percent, or maybe even just one little idea that comes out of that improvisation, has a special quality to it. It’s really expressing something I’ll pursue, so once I’ve found what I call the golden idea, I will start using compositional techniques, such as repeating motives and varying the intervals, all manner of compositional techniques, and turn it into a composition. Once that’s in place, then I’ll start adding other instruments, but again, from an improvisational point of view.

It’s always improvisational. I look for ideas sometimes from all sorts of different things, and I might have recordings of all sorts of strange sounds lying around. It might be an ashtray falling on a concrete floor and going [makes sounds], anything like that. And there’s something about that, and I’ll take that rhythm, and I’ll take that sound, and start playing, put it into a loop, and start playing to that particular sound.

HJ: Could you take two or three of your documentaries that you’ve made music for and just say what stands out for you?

TC: There’s the Equator series. There’s the one about the Amazon [Rivers of the Sun, 2005, for NHK]. Or the one that takes place in Borneo in the rainforest. Those are a couple of my favourites... interesting compositional processes that have found acceptance within the context of the film. Those are the more orchestral pieces that
I feel good about. I’m quite proud of those. *Rivers of the Sun* was one that was nominated for an Emmy award for best music and sound in 2007.

Then there’s another series in a completely different style, *Buggin with Ruud: Madagaskar* (2005) [for Discovery; Animal Planet]. That is very eclectic. It’s like avant-garde music, and I had a very interesting process with one of the executives from Animal Planet from Washington. He came over, and he’s very interested in black funk music from the 1970s, and he gave me a whole lot of music from that time. “I want the whole score just funk music,” he said. And there were thirteen, one-hour programs [episodes]. We got through one program and then he said, “We’re going to have to vary it a bit…” From that, it turned into all these kind of… avant-garde, very surreal pieces. So I’m really happy with a lot of those things. A lot of it is a quite funky, electronic, avant-garde, sort of sound, and I find them fascinating. I think they work a treat.

Reaching back, there’s one score I’ve always really liked, which was for a program called *Tarsiers* (2002) [for National Geographic]. It was in the Philippines, and it’s this little marsupial that looks like a little koala in a way, so it’s a strange animal and it’s very hard to photograph. It was a unique and interesting-sounding score that used some instruments from that area [small gong, reeds, flutes as well as guitar sounds], even mixed in with some of the Spanish influence of that region. I can’t really describe what it is, but it maintains a very individual sound, which is what I always attempt to do, and I think it succeeded in that film.

**Compositional Style**

HJ: Can you say anything about your own compositional style?

TC: When you ask composers to describe their own personal style it’s very difficult. I can only say that other people who know my music (for example, in the building at Natural History) will tell me that they recognise my particular stuff straight away. They’ll be able to say they can identify it even if they haven’t heard that particular piece before. I find that surprising. You think film music all sounds pretty similar but there must be some quality in there that is identifiable. I can’t put it into words. The only sort of word that I can use is … perhaps I have a pretty open approach musically. It’s quite often polyphonic, which is a compositional approach that I use wherever possible. Something else I’m fascinated with is polycyclic music, as opposed to polyphonic. I will have different elements in different time schemes working with or against each other.

I suppose you might get a sense of polycycles when listening to the minimalists, you know, Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Terry Riley is another one. Where you’ve got these repeating motifs, and coming in at different times and interrelating in different ways, there is a polycyclic quality to a lot of that music. It’s something that I learned when I studied and played with a musician from New York who worked very much in this way, but in the context of jazz music. He would have five or six people in this group, and five or six different timeframes that we would be working with. Over in Germany I was fascinated with how that could work not only from an intellectual perspective – because it can very quickly sound extremely intellectual and inaccessible to most people – but also in an organic, coherent kind of way.
A typical standard polycycle that I might work with would be a three, four, five polycycle; and after 60 beats all the cycles will reach the same point again. Coming up with a polycycle that doesn't sound chaotic is quite challenging. It opens up, makes the piece sound quite expansive, and you move away from any defined sense of 1, 2, 3, 4/1, 2, 3, 4/1, 2, 3 as you would if you had everybody playing in the same time, and that fascinates me, it really does, and that's something I've been working with for a lot of years.

HJ: Where in your documentaries, or any other works of yours, can we hear these polycycles?

TC: I would say it's mostly just sprinklings of polycyclic composition so far but quite often. One of my intentions, in terms of writing orchestrally, is to have an orchestra or an ensemble divided up into three groups, with three conductors, and each ensemble works in their own timeframe. But it's fairly new territory, and I've worked in jazz ensembles with polycycles too but where I'm living at the moment, I've found it very difficult to find people who are interested in pursuing that.

HJ: I know you're musically eclectic, but could you point to styles of music you've been influenced by?

TC: There're so many. Generally, we can break it down into ethnicities. World music has had a huge influence on me and I have spent a lot of time listening to the music from West Africa, as I have with Afro-Cuban music.

HJ: You spent some time in Cuba, didn't you?

TC: Yes. Generally speaking, music from different parts of the world has had a huge influence on me. Stylistically, there's jazz music, which has had an enormous impact on me. In my film composition work [jazz] almost never comes to expression because film music works with associations and if you have something that's sort of typically jazz then, for a lot of people, the association becomes something visual, like a jazz bar or a nightclub or some urban setting. So it's a little restricted how you can use more typical sounding jazz music. There are also Western art music composers, and so many have influenced me.

Improvisation attracted me to jazz music: this meeting of two giant cultures, Africa meets Europe, and how that music comes together, and how that is developed over time. The music that happens in Cuba is similar: the meeting between Spanish and French, with what the slaves brought over from Africa; the African rhythms and approach to playing, again, it's how those two musics relate. I have to say, one thing I love about that music is the joy, the happiness, and it's something you don't always find in more strictly Western classical music... a joy of living. I must say that really attracted me to be in an environment where music played a big role in making people feel good, you know, really happy.

Growing up with Western Classical and what you call more serious jazz music... what I really enjoy about the African influence is that it really makes your body want to move and makes you want to be joyful. I'm European, I love the European music tradition, and I've learnt all about that; and I love African-related rhythms, and so when those two meet, whether it be jazz or Afro-Cuban music, there is something very electric that happens, which really excites me.
HJ: You’ve mentioned Cuba, Africa and Europe. Is there place and identity in your music? Can we find New Zealand in your sound? Can we find Dunedin in your sounds?

TC: I would love to be patriotic and say, well, I look out over Mount so and so and I get this inspiration, and I’ve been studying various Māori instruments and so forth, and it would all sound good and I would probably get a lot more grants... [but] my musical tastes are very global. I just enjoy music from a lot of different places. I enjoy some New Zealand composers. The only thing that I can say about this is that when I’ve been in other places (I spent many years in Europe) some people have commented on a quality of my music that has a spaciousness, or a calm, that they attribute to me being a New Zealander. They say, oh there’s this New Zealand guy, he’s kind of laid back, seems to be pretty calm, that must be a result of him growing up in New Zealand. I’m not convinced that’s true but, again, I can only say from the outside, people have identified my music as having a certain quality that seems to be coming from somewhere else, that seems to be coming from somewhere of a calmer nature than that of the frenetic pace you might get in other parts of the world.

HJ: Do you get inspiration from other cultures, other types of music here in Dunedin?

TC: Yes, I do. The best example of that would be the collaboration I’ve had with a percussionist from Peru who did a lot towards teaching me about Afro-Cuban music and Latin rhythms. I’ve had some interaction with the gamelan people, and with folk musicians. I’ve even played with Song-Bong [djembe group].

Conclusion

Based on three broad and open-ended topics, this interview has shown some of the underpinning processes that have influenced Coleman and provide insight into how and why he composes as he does. Coleman notes that his compositional approach has always been improvisational. As a trumpet player and classically trained pianist, he moved into the field of jazz and improvisation early on in his career. He studied at Berklee College of Music in the United States and soon embarked on an international career that took him first to Europe and later back to Dunedin to work for Natural History New Zealand (NHNZ). As an improviser, he applies this compositional process to the field of film music, and produces a unique style of music that is easily recognised by those working with him.

Coleman works at the keyboard when composing documentary film music. His method of composition involves writing to a brief given to him by the producer in a process that allows him the opportunity of working conceptually and composing something unique. Rather than notating a piece of music, he looks for ideas through improvisation. Stylistically, Coleman’s music shows an eclecticism that draws from a fascination with many musical traditions. He stresses his passion for Afro-Cuban music, but also notes a love of European classical traditions.

An understanding of the background, compositional process and style of a documentary film music composer provides insight not only to the musician, but also to the genre per se. Based in the south of New Zealand, Trevor Coleman’s work has been recognised in terms of its quality not only in his own country but also internationally via a global audience. His outputs emanating from the
documentaries produced by Natural History New Zealand and elsewhere show a composer who is inspired by jazz and related Afro-Cuban sounds, grounds his music in an improvisational process, and offers a unique and eclectic compositional style.
This page is intentionally left blank
MUSIC FOR THE SILENT ONE: 
An Interview with Composer Jenny McLeod

Riette Ferreira

Abstract

The Silent One is a significant film in the context of New Zealand (NZ) cinema for several reasons. It was the first New Zealand drama feature film directed by a woman and the first using a Dolby stereo soundtrack. Its incorporation of underwater film sequences played a vital part in portraying the world of the film’s central character, Jonasi, a deaf-mute. Jonasi’s vocal inability allows for other sound elements to play an important role in the narrative and emotional content. One such element is the music score provided by Jenny McLeod who discusses her work on the film in the following interview.

Keywords

The Silent One, Jenny McLeod, film score, New Zealand film

Introduction: New Zealand Cinema Context

A baby boy in a small canoe washes up on the shore of a beautiful Pacific Island. What will the local tribe make of him? (Promotional tagline, The Silent One, 1984)

The Silent One was produced and released at a transitional moment for New Zealand cinema. As Roger Horrocks argues, around 1984 there were “profound changes... in government, in popular culture and the arts” (1999: 130) that were tied into debates about New Zealand cinematic ‘identity’. Roger Donaldson’s highly acclaimed Sleeping Dogs (1977) is generally regarded as the start of contemporary cinema in New Zealand. The success of this film, and initiatives of Donaldson and his contemporaries, led to the establishment of the New Zealand Film Commission in 1978 by an Act of Parliament that aimed “to encourage and also participate and assist in the making, promoting, distribution, and exhibition of films” (Dennis and Bieringa, 1996: 214). It also showed the government’s support for and confidence in the film industry which continues to the present day.

The 1980s brought further advances for the film industry. In 1981 the New Zealand Film Archive was founded as an independent Charitable Trust and the National Film Theatre in London presented a season entitled ‘New Zealand – Emergence of a New Cinema’. An amendment to the tax laws in 1982 permitted write-offs of production expenses for projects that were classified as ‘New Zealand film’ by the Film Commission. The New Zealand blockbuster, Goodbye Pork Pie (Geoff Murphy,
1981) was the first film to recover its costs on the home front alone and to be screened in the market section at Cannes and it played a significant part in integrating local cinema into ‘Kiwi’ culture. The score was written by New Zealand composer John Charles who now resides in Sydney, Australia. Other award-winning films of 1984 that shared the spotlight with The Silent One were Came a Hot Friday (Ian Mune, music by Stephen McCurdy), Death Warmed Up (David Blyth, music by Mark Nicholas), Vigil (Vincent Ward, music by Jack Body), Constance (Bruce Morrison, music by John Charles and Dave Gibson). The New Zealand/United Kingdom/Japan co-production Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence (Nagisa Ôshima) was filmed in the previous year with music by Ryuichi Sakamoto, whose work influenced Jenny McLeod’s music for The Silent One.

New Zealand film composers working in the 1980s did not have the benefit of formal training (and techniques for composing screen scores are still not taught in any formal setting in New Zealand). Victoria Kelly, composer of film scores such as The Ugly (Scott Reynolds, 1997), Toy Love (Harry Sinclair, 2002), Out of the Blue (Robert Sarkies, 2006) and Under the Mountain (Jonathan King, 2009), is possibly the only New Zealand composer who has a post-graduate qualification in film scoring, which she obtained at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Whereas institutions such as Victoria University in Wellington and the University of Auckland today offer courses where music in films is studied, in the 1980s no such courses were on offer. Like McLeod, composers for film scores learned by doing, drawing on their experience in concert or popular music and working under great pressure.

Jenny McLeod (born 1941 in Wellington) obtained a BMus (Hons) in 1964, having studied with Frederick Page, David Farquhar and Douglas Lilburn. She also spent two years in Europe, first under the mentorship of Olivier Messiaen, and later with Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio and Pierre Boulez. After returning to NZ, she became a lecturer at Victoria University in 1967, and later a professor at the age of twenty-nine. In the late 1980s she translated Dutch composer Peter Schat’s (1984) book on ‘tone clock’ theory into English, and illustrated its application in her Tone Clock Pieces for piano (1988–89). McLeod had previous experience in composing incidental music for theatrical works, but none for film composing. The score for The Silent One uses a variety of tone colours and an amalgam of classical, popular and traditional styles. Instrumental combinations include xylophone and bassoon to accompany Jonasi’s dream scene and the turtle is characterised by a clarinet motif.¹ The scene of a shark attack on one of the villagers is set to dramatic orchestral music. Rhythmic Cook Island drumming is often used as diegetic music. McLeod structures the score in a formal manner with the main title theme functioning as an overture, comprising motifs and rhythms that feature later in the film. Effective, although not over-abundant, synchronised music illustrates some scenes; for example, ascending passages accompany Jonasi struggling to the surface in deep water, and conclude with a brass fanfare.

The Silent One Film Overview

Directed by Yvonne Mackay, The Silent One was filmed in 1983 on Aitutaki in the Cook Islands and produced by Gibson Films. Based on the eponymous children’s book by Joy Cowley (1981), the screenplay was written by actor and film director,

¹ Instrumentation uses 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 3 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 trumpets, 3 French horns, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, 3 timpani, marimba, celesta, synthesizer, harp, piano, bass guitar, drums, choir, strings.
Ian Mune. *The Silent One* won six international awards in the ‘children’s films’ and ‘cinematography’ categories of international film festivals as well as, and relevant to this article, the ‘Best Film Soundtrack’ award at the NZ Music Awards in 1984. The Centre for New Zealand Music (SOUNZ) describes the soundtrack as “a landmark in the country’s musical heritage with an exciting blend of Polynesian, classical and popular music styles”.

Despite these accolades, the score was not released at the time although, in recognition of the soundtrack value, a CD was produced by Jayrem Records in 2009.

The *Silent One* deals with the problem of being different in a superstitious society and finding comfort in a mystical world. It tells the story of Jonasi, a deaf-mute baby boy who is washed up on a beautiful Pacific island. Due to religious prejudice, he is ostracised by both adults and children in his adopted tribe and he seeks solace in friendship with a rare white turtle. Jonasi and the turtle are regarded as evil spirits by the tribe and he must go to some lengths to protect his friend, especially when a damaging storm breaks out, for which the pair are blamed. The magic realist conclusion suggests Jonasi’s metamorphosis into a turtle and generically situates the film as fantasy.

Although the film uses several professional actors, it also draws upon the indigenous Rarotongan community of Aitutaki, including musicians. The film’s mise-en-scène conveys a sense of everyday life of the islanders. The film sequences by Australian underwater photography specialists Ron and Valerie Taylor is instrumental in conveying the movements and silent communication between Jonasi and the turtle. In terms of cinematography, Jonasi’s deafness is illustrated using techniques such as suddenly cutting to point-of-view (POV) shots combined with near-silences in the middle of festivities and noisy crowds. In a NZ Listener interview with Douglas Jenkin in 1988, director Mackay observed that, apart from the cinematography, the score of *The Silent One* was the most important element in the film. Due to the lead character’s inability to speak, Telo Malese’s acting performance had to compensate for his lack of speech and the film score became the vehicle for his emotions.

Although the setting in the South Pacific is not specified, local Cook Island musicians and traditional drumming form part of the soundtrack. McLeod incorporated folk melodies from the area into the score, and the traditional spiritual chant in the opening sequence suggests the mystical elements that evolve into magical events. She added further variety to the score by using orchestral as well as electronic music, the latter underscoring the underwater scenes where Jonasi’s special bond with the white turtle develops and suggests his being at peace in the quiet beneath the surface of the ocean. The following (edited) interview investigates Jenny McLeod’s experience of successfully scoring the music for *The Silent One*. While she has continued to write music for television and documentaries, McLeod has not scored another feature film and the interview informs the documentation of a specific moment in New Zealand cinema history.

---


3 Jayrem Records is a specialist CD and DVD publisher operating since 1977. See further details in Appendix.

4 *The Silent One* has been reviewed on ‘Moria, the Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review’ website, http://www.moria.co.nz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3351&Itemid=1 - accessed November 2009.

5 Ron and Valerie Taylor were scuba divers and fisherfolk who took up underwater photography and have become specialist filmmakers. Their first film project was released in 1962 and they have continued to pursue this work into the new millennium. See http://www.ronvaltaylor.com/ - accessed November 2009.

Approaching the task

Riette Ferreira (henceforth RF): Do you find writing for film easy in terms of finding ideas?

Jenny McLeod (henceforth JMcL): No, sometimes things come very easily and when it is film, things always have a deadline, and the film composer is the last in the production process. The studio will have already been booked to put the whole thing together. So you haven’t got time to dwell on things, whether this is the right note or not, you’ve got to work fast. That is how it was with *The Silent One*; I just went through it like a bomb.

RF: How long did you work on that film?

JMcL: I think I had about six weeks. I didn’t have time to write the score out. The whole thing was done in pencil.

RF: What inspired you in this film?

JMcL: It has a mythical quality. The story itself has a universal resonance. I like that it is legendary. It is partly realistic, but there is symbolism in it, that the turtle stands for wisdom… To me the meaning is that the victim of persecution is lifted out into something transcendental. I think the music is ‘over the top’ in a fairytale way. It is big and colourful and to me those are all qualities of a symbolic story, something that is not quite realistic.

RF: You must have been very proud of working on the first New Zealand feature film with a Dolby stereo soundtrack.

JMcL: Oh, yes, that arrived kind of late. I only found out about the problems with Dolby stereo sound after I had written the music. I added synthesizer parts afterwards because in Dolby stereo you can’t have the same thing coming out on both sides. They cancel each other out and you lose it. Maybe they have solved the problem now but it cropped up in that particular score. I had to think what I could have coming out one side that wouldn’t be cancelled out by the other side. Where the tone colours were doubled up, I had to use the synthesizer to get rid of that, or put some percussion over there or something. I like the sound of synthesizer mixed in with orchestra. It freshens it up a bit.

RF: Howard Shore once said he doesn’t think that a real orchestra will ever become obsolete in film music.

JMcL: The orchestra is brilliant! In *Harry Potter and The Philosopher’s Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001) they bring in those amorphous effects from the Polish school – they’re in the background of *For Seven* [McLeod’s ensemble for seven instruments written in 1966] too. But the film people got onto it. They hadn’t at the time of *Silent One*, but now they have. If you get good speakers and hear those film soundtracks with their special sound effects through them, you will be amazed at what is going on. It’s very good for a composer to hear. I think a lot of classical people don’t know the difference between good and bad popular style, semi-classical or film music. They live in a more ethereal world; they haven’t had the experience to know. But if you ask me, it is like the reasons why some Mozart is better than other Mozart. It is the same in pop music. With some of my composer friends it is useless to talk about good or bad soundtracks because our tastes are
completely different. A lot of my serious friends couldn’t handle Howard Shore’s soundtrack for _The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of The Ring_ (Peter Jackson, 2001), but I think certain parts are very, very good. It is about understanding the function of music in film.

Setting the Score

JMcL: I think I overdid the music in _The Silent One_.

RF: Do you mean there is too much music?

JMcL: No, not too much. I listen to it now and think today I would do something much more restrained. There wouldn’t be so many overt gestures in it now, because the score doesn’t need a big, colourful soundtrack. There is about forty minutes of music [in the 95 minute film], but some of it was recorded in the Cook Islands, which became incorporated into what I did. I didn’t add anything to the Cook Island drumming; those were just tracks on their own. There were one or two cues where I became a bit more contrived and I wasn’t happy with them either. The hunting scene was one example. I played it through to David [producer David Gibson] and he didn’t like it – and I knew he was right not to. I needed to do it again and the second version came very easily and was much better. But what comes easily in music is not always the best, in fact today, what comes easily I tend to mistrust. I find that I have to change often, or I have to develop. Nowadays you replay things using software and you can test the weaknesses of your ideas, because you keep playing things back. I trust my own responses and when I get sick of it, I will try and change it. Things can come fast, but I don’t necessarily trust them.

RF: Did you use a lot of the Cook Island traditional music?

JMcL: The Gibsons got the right to record and use recordings of some Cook Island songs. There is one at the banquet. I turned it into little xylophone tunes as well. There’s a bit of traditional singing when there’s a kind of family reunion moment. There’s a very slow electronic and string build-up on one chord, and then there’s a song after the climax. At the very start, I was imagining the listeners coming into the theatre and they see the start of the film and they don’t know what kind of a film it is going to be. I got the idea from a sound engineer who, when he started up his metronome click-dial to set the tempo, swept through the dial from the one end to the other and back again to get it in tune, and then he would set it. So I thought of the sweep right through and I would start (with the high shot of the sea) and the tune from the Cook Islands (that I had made into the background of the main theme). I put it in there on its own – so at first the audience are not sure whether it is going to be an ethnic, arty film, or not. The electronics come in gradually and then suddenly the full orchestra comes in with this grand gesture, and then they think oh, this could be a big Hollywood glossy! And then after that, it sweeps back to a kind of middle mainstream area where the score mostly stays. That was fun.

RF: The score starts from where the orchestra comes in. Marimba and xylophone come in with that theme.

JMcL: The Cook Island song is in the voices, this is a countermelody that goes with it. When you listen to the soundtrack, they vocalise on “yay”, there are no words. The song is a background to the main tune which is in the marimba and xylophones.
RF: It seems that there are variations of the motif. The interval of a third pops up everywhere. Did you consciously use this interval and does it have a symbolic meaning?

JMcL: No, in this kind of film music I certainly wasn’t thinking along those lines. There is that little pattern, the Jonasi pattern, which to me signifies Jonasi. But here I was just trying to write a nice, memorable tune... It took a while to get that tune right, but not all that long. And the harmony rotates. I love the way it just gets ready to start again and is kind of poised for a second. I haven’t discovered another way, other than harmony, to achieve that kind of poise. The harmonic movement that brings you to a point that says yes, we can start again. It is a bit like in Indian music when you get to the beat before the start of the next cycle.

RF: Are there a lot of similarities between the traditional musical elements of the Cook Islanders and the Maori?

JMcL: Well, no. Cook Islanders have wood drums and slit drums. In the old days the Maoris had the big signal drum, but their drumming had disappeared. Cook Islanders speak an older version of Maori and the Maori call them their “older brother”. They can more or less understand each other. Cook Islanders don’t have the slow waiata; the old classical Maori songs appear almost unmeasured. It is a ‘take-your-time’ kind of thing. Cook Island music is metrically more complex.

RF: Because of the drumming?

JMcL: Maybe, but the drumming and the songs don’t necessarily go together. The drumming tends to be on its own. I have noticed the little song that comes in the banquet, the feast, had mixtures of twos and threes. You find those sorts of things in some chants that Maori do. They may miss half a beat and then they will be off again. But I don’t find the two styles all that similar. The Gibsons gave me the Cook Island music because they had the rights to use it. They recorded it themselves while they were there, so it was sung by the actual people in the film. I used what I really liked if I could find a place to fit it in.

RF: Do you have any favourite keys?

JMcL: I wouldn’t say they’re favourite keys; in fact they can become quite the opposite, because of the general range of the human voice. D Major very often ends up being a comfortable key. It depends on the range of the music, whether it is dominant to dominant or tonic to tonic.

RF: Some composers think of keys as colours.

JMcL: No, I don’t think I do. I certainly don’t do it consciously, but my teacher, Messiaen, saw colours in all sorts of things. He believed everybody did. I’d say D, A, E, and G Major would be bright.

RF: What about timbres and instrument combinations?

JMcL: The Polynesian background was nice. I love wooden sounds: marimbas, xylophones, thumb piano, although I didn’t use a thumb piano. With the recordings of Cook Island music I used some wood drums and xylophones.

RF: And then the orchestral sounds as well.

JMcL: Yes, and some electronic sounds.
RF: When the white turtle appears for the first time, there was a clarinet tune. I thought that must be a leitmotif for the turtle.

JMcL: Actually, I lifted it from Chopin, one of the Preludes, with the tune in the left hand. It doesn't sound like Chopin at all and nobody has ever noticed it. It has the horns on top of it.

RF: Does your score usually develop dramatically with characters and events, like the same tune morphing through different styles?

JMcL: It probably does, but most of it wouldn't be that conscious. Like those things that symbolically stand for Jonasi, or the turtle, or the main theme. But the main thing was that they were ideas, not music. To write with the video, you have to try it out and see if it works. I was always just using my instincts.

RF: Have you got any techniques you use to bring out geographical location?

JMcL: Choice of tone colour, like using marimbas. There are no marimbas in the Cook Islands, but there is a kind of generalising these days and film composers use it all the time. There is a problem with that, because connotations are so strong you can't use those colours for anything else. Tone colours can suggest things you do not want.

RF: The subliminal effect on audiences interests me, such as what instruments and styles to choose.

JMcL: And tempi are very important too. All those things wear out as time goes by, because they become increasingly stereotyped and stereotypes tend to wear out. It is a big subject.

Inspiration and Collaboration

RF: [In an interview with David Jenkins you mentioned Ryuichi Sakamoto, saying that the music is sometimes like Sakamoto and sometimes like “pop-Rachmaninoff” (1988: 36). Did Sakamoto influence you?

JMcL: You will recognise the resemblance with Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence [Nagisa Ôshima, 1983]. The Gibsons liked it (I’d never seen it) and they came along with a recording of that and drew my attention to it. I loved it, it was great! They were giving me a ballpark area in which they thought music could be written that would suit The Silent One and I entirely agreed with them. Merry Christmas has a xylophone theme too. It's not the same theme and the harmonies are completely different and it doesn't have any Cook Island tune running through the back of it either, which kind of distinguishes it. Yes, I wrote something of the same genre. I'd like to think mine is better than his, because it has the Cook Island music as well!

RF: Let's talk about your relationship with the director and producer. Did you work well with them?

JMcL: Yes, I liked them. I liked that they always did what they said they were going to do. I could trust them. I don't think it can work if you don't have that. And in terms of how they responded to the music I proposed, there were only a couple of occasions where Dave said ‘no’ and I agreed with him.

RF: How did you communicate with them?
JMcL: Just by demos, tapes or I played passages for them.

RF: Were they exact about where they wanted music?

JMcL: We talked it through first; they asked me where music would fit in too. Dave couldn't sing in tune, but he had good musical instincts. On occasions when he didn't like the music he didn't always know why, but I knew - because it was too contrived, it didn't sound natural.

RF: Were you involved in the editing at all?

JMcL: They supposedly gave me the finished version and you write your bits to fit that version and suddenly they changed it. I had written a whole sequence for the shark attack. There had to be a lot of synchronising and then they went and changed the length. I was there for the final mix, yes.

RF: Any input in the Cook Island drumming? They recorded it there.

JMcL: We put it down an octave, for the witchdoctor.

RF: Did they ever ask your advice on any other aspect of sound design?

JMcL: Yes, the turtle call. I had worked with Tim Jordan, the sound editor, on the Sun Festival in Oriental Bay. We worked out some electronic passages together. I called him in, because I figured we would need a turtle call that was done electronically.

RF: It wasn't a whale call as was suggested in some reviews?

JMcL: No, it was a layered sound that he created.

RF: Were you involved in the filming process?

JMcL: No, I never went there. It was all done by the time they asked me to write the music.

RF: Would you have liked to be part of the process, to get a feel for it?

JMcL: I don't know what I could have done or if it would have helped. When we did Cuckooland [Yvonne Mackay, 1986 television series] on the other hand, they came to me first. It was after The Silent One, so we had a very good relationship. I wrote all the songs and recorded them before they even started shooting. So they took their cue for the whole episode from the songs, which was good. And I did a few things they could use in between. That was later and it was pretty simple, on a synthesizer. But if you do it with an orchestra, you have to plan ahead and book sessions and make sure they are all there. With Silent One we got to the end of the booked session and it was about midnight and we still had about three quarters of an hour to finish the recording and the players were magnificent. They all agreed to stay, because they liked the music. It was brilliant.

RF: What would be the biggest hurdle or frustration in the production process?

JMcL: The time was not so much frustration; you just had to get on with it. The least enjoyable aspect about writing anything to commission is 'will I be able to do it?'

RF: What was the most rewarding?
JMcL: It was a challenge and it worked out well.

RF: Did you receive any feedback from audience members?

JMcL: Yes, people liked the music and there was a bunch of my composer friends from the ‘serious world’ who really loved it. There were also people like Ken Young and Barry Johnstone from the NZSO [New Zealand Symphony Orchestra] who thought it was great. I knew it was good music. It was one of those pieces that I can look back on and say, “That’s good, it’s got the qualities.”

The Language of Film Music

RF: You said that you were trying to appeal to a wider audience as well as a local one and that you used a variety of modes, but you feel it all hangs together. What did you mean by that?

JMcL: Modes as in styles, or modes of expression. Not musical modes, I didn’t mean that. I didn’t consciously use any new scales. Sometimes I used modes of expression more to create dramatic effect and the music is not tuneful at all, it is just creating an effect.

RF: And is it largely about the emotion?

JMcL: It depends on the film. I think music for film can do a lot more than it has done... in terms of the range and people being very sensitive to very small sounds.

RF: And with the good systems we have in theatres nowadays?

JMcL: Yes. I really enjoy listening to the soundtracks, mainly films I watch on television now. Hearing what they're doing and how things are changing and watching the techniques of films and the way things get telescoped. Things you once had to put in you no longer do, because people know, it’s understood. I think that kind of thing really applies to the language of music as well and the language of film music. It is a little bit along the lines of what I said about restraint. I mean, if Wagner were alive today, he would probably get through one of his operas in half an hour, because it wouldn't need all the bits in between! So I think the history of our experience of expression affects how we experience it now and it changes the modes of expression filmmakers and composers use. It applies to some concert music too. I think there will be ongoing change and it will be very interesting.

RF: Do you think a film composer needs special training?

JMcL: The whole technique of writing film music has changed now with computers. There are a lot of things you would need to know. I think hands-on is the best way of learning anything.

RF: And that's how you did it?

JMcL: There was nowhere to go and no time, I had to make up my mind. I don't know why they left it so late; it was very daring of them. Just looking at films and listening and seeing what other film composers do.

RF: Do you have a favourite film composer?
JMcL: I love Ennio Morricone. He chooses such odd combinations of instruments and the choice of the actual timbre can be crucial in film music - like the sound of a mouth organ, how evocative that is of a certain kind of film even. He is particularly good.

RF: You don’t particularly use his techniques?

JMcL: I got used to listening to him. After I did *The Silent One* I started listening to soundtracks. Before that, the soundtrack could be subliminal; I didn’t really notice or pay much attention to it. But after that and ever since, I’ve been listening. After you’ve done it yourself you have some appreciation of the craft, you realise it’s not an easy job. For instance, [New Zealand composer] David Farquhar said to me he could never get the music to be the right length.

RF: That is very important.

JMcL: Yes, you had to record at the right metronome markings.

RF: And the images were already edited.

JMcL: Yes, the challenge was to make it sound like music and fit the action, because there are these key moments in the action where there has to be synchronisation. And I didn’t know about that then, I have learned since how the old composers have done it, by watching. I just did it by metronome markings, working out to the beat. Sometimes you have got to be right on, other places it can be a little out. The music for a shot doesn’t always begin at the beginning of a shot.

RF: Do you find writing for film a challenge, or rather restrictive?

JMcL: If you find it restrictive, then you’re not a film composer. It has to be a challenge, otherwise you won’t enjoy it and if you don’t enjoy it, you’re not going to write anything anyone else is going to enjoy.

RF: Richard Rodney Bennett [Ford, 2001: 207] said that writing film music couldn’t possibly use all your musical ability. Do you agree?

JMcL: Never say never! He had a lot of experience, also in concert music. He said something else that made me wonder a bit too, and that is that it’s okay to do both, but you should never mix film music and concert music up. That, to me, indicates a kind of split in his mind – that they are two different worlds. But there are more serious kinds of film music, art films.

RF: Do you think a film composer needs specific skills?

JMcL: Probably, I think we would agree that not everybody is a natural film composer.

RF: Things like working under stress?

JMcL: Oh, yes, and working with other people and having to rewrite music.

RF: Do you have other compositions that can be arranged as film music?

JMcL: Yes, more in the sort of light pop-classical pieces. There was some interplay; I was taking some bits out of *Cuckooland*, jazzy, bluesy, passages that I thought I could turn into a sonata movement. So I got double mileage out of the same material. Somebody rang up and asked if I would be interested in doing the music
for a series on migration of Maori to New Zealand. I immediately had title music for it, but they never did it and I changed it a bit and eventually used it for another film score, a documentary with a lot of sea in it: *Beyond the Roaring 40s* [Conon Fraser, 1986].

RF: That’s about the Antarctic islands.

JMcL: That’s right, there was this big sea theme in there and then the metre changed and other things happened to it and it was also the first movement for the *Three Celebrations for Orchestra* (1987). I don’t know if I would do it anymore. I don’t think so, but at that stage my semi-classical music still had a lot of pop streams coming into it.

RF: Are there any film scores that stand out for you?

JMcL: John Williams does things like the saloon sequence in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), the strange sort of mocking music; I think he does that really well. I like Jerry Goldsmith’s music. Jerry Fielding wrote some really good film music too. The New Zealand composer, Graeme Revell, who lives in Hollywood, does interesting scores. He did *Dead Calm* (Phillip Noyce, 1989). He’s done about eighty films. He had no training or experience. In a radio interview Graeme talked about Penderecki and how he ended up writing and recording Penderecki-style effects for big orchestra and used it in every film.

RF: Would you agree that film music could be a vehicle for avant-garde music and, even subliminally, expose an audience to that kind of sound?

JMcL: It is done, but I don’t know if it is a good thing, because in film music the kind of staged avant-garde sounds you hear are where they try to freak the audience out. Film composers are such magpies; they’ll pick up any style that can help them create an effect for something. That’s what works as the stereotype with a mass audience.

RF: Do you think New Zealand film music can be distinguished from other countries?

JMcL: Can New Zealand as a country be distinguished from other countries? There are qualities of New Zealanders that can be mirrored in their music. I think it is a kind of dryness. Whether there are special qualities depends on the consciousness of the composer. There is a down-to-earth-ness. I never think about this. I say, if it was written by a New Zealander, it is New Zealand music!

Conclusion

Jenny McLeod is admired by her peers and is one of New Zealand’s most accessible and well-liked composers. The rest of her oeuvre includes large-scale works *Earth and Sky* (1969), *Under the Sun* (1971) and *He Iwi Kotahi Tatou* (1991) for combinations of Maori and Pakeha adult and children’s massed choirs, orchestras and rock groups. Other examples of her work are *For Seven* (performed by the

---

Stockhausen Ensemble), 17 Tone Clock Pieces for piano, many songs and hymns, and recently The Poet for chamber choir and string quartet on a cycle of 11 poems by Janet Frame (2008). She aims to communicate effectively with the audience but, at the same time, portray a sophistication that reflects her intellectual outlook on life. She has had diverse musical experiences throughout her career and her music for The Silent One demonstrates this. Her score for this film also influenced later works, for example, melodic and rhythmic motives appear in Jazz Themes (1987) and Three Celebrations for Orchestra (1987). McLeod’s screen music and compositional practice – for The Silent One and subsequently for television series and documentaries – offers a useful body of work for Australasian screen sound studies.

Bibliography


Appendix

The Silent One: Awards

1984 - New Zealand Music Awards: Best Film Soundtrack: Jenny McLeod.
1984 - Frankfurt Film Festival for Youth: Best Children’s Film
1984 - Silver Gryphon - Giffoni Film Festival for Children, Italy
1985 - Moscow Film Festival: Silver Medal: Children’s Section, Russia
1985 - Figueras de Foz Festival, Portugal: Best Children’s Film
1986 - Chicago Children’s Film Festival: Best Cinematography
1986 - Paris Film Festival for Children and Young People: Best Actor: Telo Malase (Jonasi) and Special Jury Prize for Best Film.

The Silent One: Film Credits

Director: Yvonne Mackay
Producer: Dave Gibson
Executive producer: David Compton
Screenplay: Ian Mune
Based on the novel by Joy Cowley
Director of photography: Ian Paul
Designer: Tony Rabbit
Film editor: Jamie Selkirk
Underwater photography: Ron & Valerie Taylor
Music composed by Jenny McLeod
Cast: Telo Malese (Jonasi), George Henare (Paui Te Po), Pat Evison (Luisa), Anzac Wallace (Tasiri), Rongo Tupatea Kahu (Taruga), Jo Pahu (Etika), Reg Ruka (Bulai), Anthony Gilbert (Aesake), Bernard Kearns (Redbeard), Prince Tui Teka (Postmaster)
35mm, 95 minutes

The Silent One: Soundtrack Information
Jayrem Records Ltd - CDJAY321 - 42 min. UPC #9421002391681
Performed by the Wellington Regional Orchestra, conducted by William Southgate.
Leader: May Hannan; Piano: Kevin Wooding; Bass: Barry Johnstone; Drums: Bud Jones.
The Bach Choir conducted by Roy Tankersley with Kathy Blennerhassett, soloist.
Electronic engineer and Turtle calls by Tim Jordan.
Drum tracks on location in Aitutaki, Cook Islands, by “The Aitutaki Diggers”.
Arranged by Craig Utting.
Recorded and mixed at The Studio Centre, Wellington, by Garry Clark.
Tracklisting for The Silent One: Original Soundtracks CD: Ancient Voices; Main Title Theme; The Meeting; Ka ta te Puaka; Night To Day; Underwater Ballet; Homecoming; The Call; Pau; Te Kaikai; Discovery; Rude Awakening; The Cry; Trouble; Peril, The Turtle Hunt; Shark; Jonasi Weeps; Confrontation; The Return and Jonasi’s Theme.

Jenny McLeod’s Screen Music

*The Gift* (John King, 1987, documentary)
*Cuckooland* (Yvonne Mackay, 1986, television series)
*Beyond the Roaring Forties* (Conon Fraser, 1986, NZFU, documentary)
*The Haunting of Barney Palmer* (Yvonne Mackay, 1985, electronic music for television film)
*The Neglected Miracle* (Barry Barclay, 1985, documentary)
Plants (Barry Barclay, 1985, promotional video)
*The Silent One* (Yvonne Mackay, 1983, feature film)
CONTRIBUTOR PROFILES

RIETTE FERREIRA
Riette Ferreira is a PhD candidate and tutor in the School of Music at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, having previously obtained a BMus and MMus from the University of Pretoria and a BMus(Hons) from the University of South Africa. She has been a music teacher and lecturer for 26 years as well as piano accompanist and répétiteur. Publications include articles in the International Alliance for Women in Music Journal and New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2nd edn, 2001). E-mail: riettef@gmail.com

LIZ GIUFFRE
Liz Giuffre is currently a PhD candidate at Macquarie University, Australia, in the department of Media, Music and Cultural Studies, and holds an MA (Research) Macquarie and BA (Hons) UNSW. She is also a music and arts journalist and non-practicing musician. Email: lizgiuffre@yahoo.com.au

NICK HADLAND
Nick Hadland graduated from the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, in 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts Honours First Class in Film Studies. He is currently living in Sydney and researching music, nostalgia and the family in the films of Wes Anderson. Email: nhadland@gmail.com

MICHAEL HANNAN
Professor Michael Hannan established the Contemporary Music program at Southern Cross University, Australia, and teaches composition and music theory. He is the sole author of two books, Peter Sculthorpe: His Music and Ideas 1929-1979 (University of Queensland Press, 1982) and The Australian Guide to Careers in Music (UNSW Press, 2003). Hannan is a Chief Investigator on an ARC Discovery project on Australian feature film music, including cataloguing scores in the Brian May archive. Email: michael.hannan@scu.edu.au

PHILIP HAYWARD
Professor Philip Hayward is Director of Research Training at Southern Cross University, Australia. He has edited two volumes on screen sound – Off The Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema (John Libbey, 2004) and Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema (Equinox, 2009) – and, as a team of ARC Discovery Project researchers, is currently investigating uses of music in contemporary Australian cinema. Email: prhsicri@gmail.com

HENRY JOHNSON
Henry Johnson is Professor in the Department of Music, University of Otago, New Zealand. His teaching and research interests are in the field of ethnomusicology, particularly the creative and performing arts of Asia and
its diasporas. His recent books include *The Koto* (Hotei, 2004), *Asia in the Making of New Zealand* (Auckland UP, 2006; co-edited with Brian Moloughney), *Performing Japan* (Global Oriental, 2008; co-edited with Jerry Jaffe), and *The Shamisen* (Brill, 2010). His article on Japanese animation, music education and cultural nationalism was published in *Animation Journal* (2009).

Email: henry.johnson@otago.ac.nz

**JAMES WIERZBICKI**

Prior to his 2010 post in the Arts Music unit at the University of Sydney, Australia, James Wierzbicki taught musicology at the University of Michigan and the University of California-Irvine, USA, and he was chief classical music critic for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and other major American newspapers. His research focuses on twentieth-century music and film music and has been published in journals including *Beethoven Forum*, *Music and the Moving Image*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and *Musical Quarterly*. His books include a monograph on the electronic score for the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet* (Scarecrow Press, 2005) and *Film Music: A History* (Routledge, 2009).

Email: james.wierzbicki@sydney.edu.au