THE MOVIE, THE MELODY AND YOU: How Pop Music Connects Film Narrative to its Audience

Martin Armiger

Abstract

In recent years the authority of the composed film score has come under critical scrutiny. Some suggest it carries too much weight, freight and affect. The ‘song score’ has provided an alternative way of scoring film, one in which the emotional content and—crucially—the source and the authority for that emotional content exists somewhere outside the film. There is a body of common knowledge about popular music among cinema and television audiences, a familiarity on which the providers of film scores have long relied. For many years this familiarity was centred on ‘the song’ itself, that is, the composition. More recently, this familiarity has been with ‘the track’, that is, the recording of the song that has most recently achieved fame. But the song score has problems of its own, to do with its inherent form, which may be rhythmically inflexible, and its own subject matter, which may be not quite apposite. In this article, I provide a composer’s perspective on these issues, and look at examples of songs in film, both triumphs and failures, from American and British cinema and from my own work in Australian film and TV.

Keywords

Song score, soundtrack, composer, popular music, Australian cinema

Introduction

The following ten observations look at the ways that popular music connects film narrative to audiences through the ‘song-score’ and ‘song worked into score’ in a variety of film examples and in my own practice as a songwriter and film composer.

1. A Song Connects the Film to the World

There are so many songs on so many films that film almost implies song. Film without song is the anomaly. This has clearly been the case for some time with regard to comedies, romantic comedies and coming-of-age dramas, and is becoming increasingly true for drama generally. But the notion of what a song is, in these contexts, has changed; in fact, it has been changing for a long while.

There is a distinction commonly used in music publishing between the song as a written work and the performance of that song. For the first fifty or so years of
film’s life the song-as-written provided the material for the film to do with as it chose. One of the stars would sing it, creating a new value for it, or the orchestra would play a version of it, adapting tempo and voicings to the action. So if an orchestra (or a tin whistle) played the tune ‘I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles’ (1919), the audience recognised that song, recognised the words that belonged to it, and could be expected if not to share the emotion expressed in the song, at least to have an attitude toward the ‘feeling-state’ that might be supposed to go along with it. The entire body of work that comprises twentieth century popular music history provided for the filmmakers something like what Tyndale’s bible provided for the dramatists of Jacobean England: a canon. Every film that used one of these songs on the soundtrack, from the beginning of the ‘talkies’ and even before that, in the ‘live’ accompaniments to ‘silent’ (non-synchronised films) films—from Charlie Chaplin’s films, through all the early romances, screwball comedies, dramas like Gone with the Wind (Victor Fleming, George Cukor, Sam Wood, 1939) all the way through to the 1960s—depended on the audience recognising a tune, and knowing the words that belong to it, no matter who was playing the tune or what instrumental line-up was being employed. Its recognisability gave the song its value to the film experience. Orchestras, singers, arrangers and musical directors were employed to create new versions of known songs, to make them fresh, or to weave them into the fabric of musical narration that accompanied the particular visual and verbal narrative of the film.

For instance, in Preston Sturges’ The Lady Eve (1941) on board the ship when Eve Harrington (Barbara Stanwyck) meets Charles ‘Hopsy’ Pike (Henry Fonda) for the first time and takes him into her sumptuous cabin, the music in the background is a version of ‘Isn’t It Romantic’ (music by Richard Rogers, lyrics by Lorenz Hart, 1932). This song was first made famous by Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald in the film Love Me Tonight (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932). But it was not necessary for the audience to hear Chevalier’s French-accented version for the song to perform its function. The syrupy orchestral version by music director Sigmund Krumgold was enough for Sturges’ purpose. ‘Isn’t It Romantic’ was one of those songs whose melody itself called up to the audiences of the 1930s, 40s, 50s and even into the 60s: a set of words, a mood, and more: an expectation of romantic possibility.

Isn’t it romantic?
Merely to be young on such a night as this?
Isn’t it romantic?
Every note that’s sung is like a lover’s kiss.
Sweet symbols in the moonlight
Do you mean that I will fall in love perchance?
Isn’t it romance?
(Sony/ATV Music Publishing)

Sturges’ use in 1941 of a song written in 1932 shows even then a tendency observed much later by Ian Garwood in relation to Sleepless in Seattle (Nora Ephron, 1993). Garwood discusses a ‘perception that older songs engage more

---

1 I mean by this every song written since Irving Berlin’s Fascinating Rhythm (1911), every song written for the purpose of being sold, every song that, through the technology of recording and through the commercial apparatus of the music business, reached a mass audience.

2 See the many handbook guides for film accompanists by Chappell, Warner Bros and other publishers, and, for example, Sabaneyev (1935) and Bazelin (1971).
transparently and expressively with the idea of romance than more modern, and
cynical, artistic texts” (2000: 283). This seemed highly plausible in 1993, it was
maybe even so in 1941.

Garwood characterises the songs in *Sleepless* (and others like it) as “a kind of
counsel”. The romantic resolution, he says, “relies on the leads gaining a sense of
self-belief that has been discernible all along in the songs” (ibid: 285). In *Sleepless in
Seattle* the songs on the soundtrack are played in their sung versions, the lyrics
are therefore foregrounded, and the counselling is overt. In the older films the
songs didn’t need to be sung: the melody implied the lyric.

2. When Songs Go Wrong…

In musicals, usually adapted from the stage, some sort of romantic plot (involving
scenes in which characters occasionally burst into song or dance) alternated with
episodes of wit, humour or farce. (With the Marx Brothers you got all three.) Most
musicals showcased the virtuosity of the singer or dancer: Fred Astaire, Julie
Garland, Bing Crosby. The songs in these musicals seemed to aspire to the notion
that music begins where words leave off. The Marx Brothers didn’t seem interested
in all that. In fact I still remember that sinking feeling when watching their movies
years ago; the moment the Marx Brothers cease fooling around, leave the stage,
clear the set, and make way for the romance to start. Gummo (or maybe Zeppo, or
sometimes a ring-in ‘leading man’ like Oscar Shaw) starts to sing. And suddenly,
*everything stops!*

I used to wonder why they bothered. Everyone wants to see the Marx Brothers in
full flight—the anarchic physical mayhem of Harpo, the determined stupidity of
Chico, the relentlessly verbal, slyly philosophical Groucho. That’s what we watch
their films for. Not for the romance, surely? Not for the songs. I always loathed
those songs. They seemed to ask us, the audience, to buy into the sentimental
mush that the rest of the scenario was lampooning.3

Yet, curiously, the original scripts for some of their best films, including *Duck Soup*
(Leo McCarey, 1933) and *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930), were written by
their songwriters, Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby (see Blount Jnr, 2010). Curious
because, typically, the Marx Brothers comedy comes from *the challenge to music*
and all its accoutrements. For instance, in the rhumba scene in *A Night in
Casablanca* (Archie Mayo, 1946) the dancers on the floor (including Groucho and
his *femme fatale*) find the floor itself disappearing, as Chico and Harpo crowd more
and more tables onto it so as to get bribe money from patrons. Then when the
dancers can hardly move at all, Chico takes over on piano and plays the ‘Beer
Barrel Polka’ (aka ‘Roll Out the Barrel’, 1927) with his famous pistol-finger

---

3 *The Cocoanuts* (1929) adapted from the Broadway production, directed by Robert Florey and Joseph Santley and written
by George Kaufman (the play) and Morrie Ryskind (the screenplay), had songs by Irving Berlin. *Animal Crackers* (1930)
included songs by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby that were mostly soppy and sung by the romantic couple. But the most
memorable song in that film is ‘Hooray For Captain Spaulding’ in which Groucho agrees to arrive only under certain
conditions (‘The men must all be very old, the women hot, the champagne cold…’) and when he does finally arrive his first
words are, ‘Hello, I must be going…’ introducing the song which became, in later years, a kind of theme song for Groucho.
A more consistently comedic approach to song was in *Duck Soup* (Leo McCabey, 1933; songs and script by Bert Kalmar
and Harry Ruby). Groucho played Rufus T Firefly. The songs were noticeably less soppy, and include ‘Hymn to Freedonia’
and ‘Freedonia is Going To War’. *A Night at The Opera* (Sam Wood, Edmund Goulding, 1935) apart from the dose of
Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* has ‘All I do is Dream of You’ (1934, music and lyrics by Herbert Stothart).
technique; and, to the on-screen audience’s delight, reduces the smooth up-market
dance band to a rough beer hall mob.

Even though there were some terrific songwriters involved in their films, the only
songs that give me any pleasure (I admit) are those that Groucho sings. In the
MGM feature *At The Circus* (Edward Buzzell, 1936) for instance, he gives us this one:

*Lydia oh! Lydia, say have you met Lydia? Oh! Lydia the tattooed lady,
She has eyes that folks adore so, And a torso even more so.
Lydia oh! Lydia that encyclopaedia, oh! Lydia the queen of tattoo.
On her back is the Battle of Waterloo
Beside it the Wreck of the Hesperus too,
And proudly above waves the red, white and blue,
You can learn a lot from Lydia.*

This ditty, with its vaudeville-style music and its lyrics teetering somewhere
between wit and sleaze, comes from a spot close to Groucho’s heart. The idea of an
education that requires you to examine every inch of a woman’s body—of course!
The spirit of the humour is not so far from the lighter moments of Eminem, or De
La Soul, or Outkast. This spirit takes a popular musical form and lashes onto it a
caucistic appraisal of interpersonal relationships, while greedily and unapologetically
enjoying the physical attributes of the sexual object. The Marx Bros always assume
that any audience will prefer low entertainment to high art, hot dogs to *filet mignon*,
baseball to opera, beer hall to concert hall.

But there’s another factor at work. When Groucho sings, the movie doesn’t ‘stop’
because he *is* the movie. And into his way of singing a song he takes the same
attitude as he takes into all his discourse: on the other hand, when the lovers sing
they have to stop doing what they do just to express (rather stiltedly) in song the
emotion of the moment—love, regret, whatever it is. But *people don’t sing like that
in real life!* Overcoming that inherent falsity of behaviour is one of the things the
musical had to struggle with and (eventually) be defeated by.

The musical’s conceit, this bursting into song, was acceptable for a while, before
the recording industry took over from ordinary people the business of singing, in
the days when people actually did sing in public, and you could imagine reasons
for them singing. In Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) an entire busload
of travellers join together singing ‘That Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze’
(1867). Peter (Clark Gable) joins in with them quite convincingly. (By contrast, in
*Trains and Boats and Planes* [John Hughes, 1987] Steve Martin’s attempt to lead
the bus travellers in a singalong fails—the song is too precious, tooarty. It takes
John Candy’s rendition of ‘Meet The Flintstones’ (Hoyt Curtin’s theme song, 1960-
1966) to unite the crowd in song.

To people who do actually sing, the performative aspect is important. In Howard
Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), Susan (Katherine Hepburn) persuades David
(Cary Grant) to join her in singing to the pet leopard, Baby, who is up a tree at the
time. She starts the song and the absent-minded professor sings the harmony to
the melody “I can’t give you anything but love, Baby…” The harmony-singing goes
along easily for the first half of the verse. Then comes the tricky bit:

---

4 Music by: Harold Arlen, lyrics by: E.Y. Harburg; published by Leo Feist of NY, USA.
Grant pulls off a quietly spectacular harmony, and, having achieved that, gives himself (and us) a small smile of satisfaction. It’s a moment that speaks to the truth of singing, from a time when people still knew what singing was about.

3. Songs on Film: My Part in the Practice

It’s not that I don’t appreciate good songwriting. I’ve been a composer and musical arranger for film and TV for thirty-odd years, and a songwriter for longer than that. As well as writing songs, I’ve played them and sung them (my own and other people’s) arranged them, adapted them, produced them, structured scores around them, worked with other writers, arrangers, orchestrators, recording engineers, record companies and publishers, singers and players to help make songs work for film and television.

Like most of those who came to Australian filmmaking back in the 1970s and 80s, I came unburdened by theory. What I had was the strong impression that most music for films wasn’t quite hitting the mark when it tried to represent the music of my times. It seemed to me that the best songwriters, singers, musicians and producers, were not getting their music onto film or TV. That’s not simply to express a proprietorial ambition, more an awareness of a disconnect between what filmmakers thought was good music and what the people I knew thought was good music. Neither rock nor jazz musicians, nor the music academics seemed to think much of film music in those days. Conservatorium teachers turned their noses up at film composers (and still do). Ethnographists would complain (and still do) that filmic representations of ethnically specific groups were always off the mark, and their sonic representations even more so. Claudia Gorbman (2010) has written about the laughably reductive and false idea of ‘Indian (Native American) music’ that pervaded Hollywood’s Westerns for fifty years.

Of course, Hollywood distorts everything it looks at. And sometimes we prefer the distorted view. But that distorting process detracts from, undermines, and can even completely destroy the audience’s perception that what they are looking at and listening to has some element of ‘truth’ to it. My feeling was that no one was getting contemporary music on film right. The way films presented rock music was about on a par with the way they did ‘Indian’ music.

In 1975 Bert Deling asked me to ‘do’ the music for Pure Shit, his feature film about heroin users. He had seen the band The Toads (for whom I wrote most of the music and played guitar) playing at the midnight shows at The Pram Factory in the Melbourne inner-city suburb of Carlton. The other band on those evenings was Spo-Dee-O-Dee, a Rhythm and Blues outfit led by the sax player Paul Dixon. All Bert really wanted for his film was the songs: he wanted the soundtrack to the film to be the same as the soundtrack to those nights in Carlton. He booked Armstrong’s Recording Studio in South Melbourne for a day and thought we could get both bands in, one after the other, record about sixteen songs, mix, edit, and

---

5 Stanley Cavell (1981) has written at length and illuminatingly on these two last-mentioned films from the 1930s.

6 The Australian feature film industry underwent a major revival dating from the late 1960s.
get out before midnight. I talked to him about maybe writing some music for some of the dramatic bits of the film (I’d been to Flinders University studying film, and had a few ideas about what should happen in a music score) but he wasn’t interested. All the same I did write a few pieces of score and recorded them on the same day. The best of these was for the moment when our protagonists (played by Gary Waddell, John Laurie, Carol Porter and Ann Heatherington) finally obtain some dope and hit up in a kitchen. The scene was shot with brutal realism (close-ups of needles probing veins) but the calm afterwards was the stillness at the centre of the film. I wrote a sort of sombre wordless ballad, part-anthem, part-threnody, with the tenor saxophone leading upwards to a more-or-less triumphant climax; then got Paul Dixon to improvise a solo on the second chorus. We did two takes and I ended up mixing it so that you could hear both takes together. Looking at the picture of these boys and girls shooting up and hearing Dixon’s soaring melodic solo you suddenly felt that all the garbage they put themselves through was worthwhile for just this moment. This was, perhaps, a mistake. I overstated the case. In the final mix of the film they stopped the track just before the sax took off. Seems there was enough trouble already with people saying the film glorified junkies.

4. A Song Solves the Problem of Film Music’s Ontology

Most films expect us, the audience, to take what we see on the screen as if it is really happening. That expectation might sometimes demand a deal of goodwill. We know, we absolutely know, that what is on the screen is not real. But generally filmmakers try to persuade their audiences to negotiate a path through belief and disbelief and just go with it.

In fact, to any given screen narrative there can be many aspects lacking the ring of truth. Yet we are expected to ignore that. It’s part of the contract. Actors speak words of dialogue that have been selected, shaped and edited to sound like authentic speech for that character in that situation. They move about on location or on sets designed to look like actual locations. In short, everything about the film is designed to convince us, the audience, that what we are looking at is real. Once the main titles are over, in most films, everything we see on screen and everything we hear on the soundtrack belongs to the diegesis, the world of the film. Everything, that is, except the music score.

Film music occupies a strange space, conceptually. Specifically, it’s a question of ontology: where does it come from? How did it get to be where it is? The question is most acute when there is a purpose-written score to the film. It’s as if the filmmakers have added a running commentary to the action of the narrative. In fact, with score, that’s just what they’ve done. It’s just that the commentary is not in words but in music. The written score provides a non-verbal commentary, another dimension to the narrative, sometimes taking the point of view of a character, sometimes of the filmmaker, sometimes putting itself into the point of view of the audience, or what the filmmakers hope the audience will want to feel.

---

7 For example to suspend the knowledge that we have recently seen this actor playing another character in another film; and yes, we just read something about that actress on twitter. And yes, this on-screen situation is totally unbelievable—one hitman marries another, say, and neither of them know what the other does for a crust.

8 Not ‘where did the idea come from’ in terms of film production practice and history: where, physically, literally, is the music coming from?
The function of the score in a filmed narrative is a large and complex subject, historically and culturally modulated, bound up with production practices as well as audience expectations. There have been times when film has depended utterly on its score. But for various reasons, and to varying degrees in different genres, the status of the written music score, its authority, its conceptual underpinning, has been threatened to the point of terminal damage. What has replaced the score in these genres is the song.

Here’s an early example of the coming shift: For the opening sequence of Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1958) Henry Mancini wrote a pulsing, tension-filled, bongo-driven piece to accompany the long tracking shot through the Mexican border town, the traffic jam of cars inching towards the customs barriers, the crowds going in and out of the bars and cafés, the strolling off-duty policeman and his wife (Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh), and all the while we are getting closer to the explosion we know is coming, the ticking of the drum kit propelling us, the music combining a sense of place, time, character, plot and fate.

It’s a bravura piece of filmmaking. I was quite surprised to learn, many years later in Walter Murch’s 1998 essay, that Welles himself was disappointed in the music. “I assume this is temp music...”, he wrote in his notes, the one time he was allowed to see the film. What Welles wanted was more of a montage of music, different songs in differing styles coming out of every bar we pass, creating the mélange of the border town, with all its idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. He wanted difference not sameness, seeming randomness rather than seeming artifice. Murch attempted to create what Welles wanted in the re-released version of the film. Is it successful? To me it is less interesting. But perhaps, by using ‘real’ (that is, pre-existing) songs, and so being less obviously structured, it makes the film seem more real. So Murch reveals Welles as more modern than Mancini would have him.

A song exists in its own right. Unlike a score, it exists outside the film. Songs are autonomous, scores parasitic. Songs are not like the movie sets. You can’t live in a set, but the song has a life of its own, which gives it a very privileged existence among film’s elements. Songs solve the problem of film music’s ontology.

5. Song on Film is Not Just a Song but a Performance

In 1958, the Universal Studio bosses rejected Welles’ concerns and stuck with Mancini’s score. And then what happened? On or about July 1964 everything that

---

9 One reason is this: the composed score seems to encourage a certain emotional response from the audience; and, if the composer is not very careful, these encouragements are more pointed than directors and audiences want.

10 What he actually said was: “I assume that the music now backing the opening sequence of the picture is temporary. As the camera roves through the streets of the Mexican bordertown, the plan was to feature a succession of different and contrasting Latin American musical numbers—the effect, that is, of our passing one cabaret orchestra after another. In honky-tonk districts on the border, loudspeakers are over the entrance of every joint, large or small, each blasting out its own tune by way of a ‘come-on’ or ‘pitch’ for the tourists. The fact that the streets are invariably loud with this music was planned as a basic device throughout the entire picture. The special use of contrasting ‘mambo-type’ rhythm numbers with rock ‘n’ roll will be developed in some detail at the end of this memo, when I’ll take up details of the ‘beat’ and also specifics of musical color and instrumentation on a scene-by-scene and transition-by-transition basis.” Welles (1956: online).

11 Other similarly privileged elements, of course, are the actors.
had been assumed about songs on film changed. And it happened quite quickly. Suddenly the song, as a work, as a freestanding piece of intellectual property, lost its iconic status.

After the first Beatles, Rolling Stones, Ronettes and Kinks records; after the work of record producers like George Martin, Phil Spector, Tony Visconti, Brian Wilson, and Shel Talmy; after this hyper-development by the recording industry of its teenage market, the song was not enough. It was the performance of the song that mattered, the particular performance embodied in the recording that was released by the record company, promoted, played on the radio and juke-boxes until it became a hit: that performance by that particular recording artist, and only that performance by that recording artist, had value. Everything else was a copy, and, as such, worthless.

In Walter Benjamin’s terms (1936), this is the way that the work of art found its worth in an age of mechanical reproduction. It wasn’t the particular piece of vinyl stamped with these particular grooves—the 45rpm record—that anybody cared about: it was the performance embedded in that piece of vinyl. Therein lies the authority.

_A Hard Day’s Night_ (Richard Lester, 1964) follows in many ways the traditional format for a ‘backstage’ film musical. The camera follows The Beatles around as they prepare for a performance (which will be filmed) and deal with the problems attendant on this new kind of stardom: the prohibitions of various authority figures, the ceaseless intrusive attention of their fans and the consequences of their own japes. Every now and again one of the band pulls out a guitar and starts to play and sing. But a number of things make this film stand out.

Above all is a new relationship between music and picture. Half-an-hour into the film, as the song ‘Can’t Buy Me Love’ (1964) plays on the soundtrack, we see The Beatles without instruments running, jumping, falling down, mug-boxing and generally mucking about on a playing field, filmed from a great height intercut with close-ups; three minutes of fairly pointless activity which is nevertheless and inexplicably amusing. The song legitimizes the vision. The vision doesn’t have to

---

12 A Hard Day’s Night, the Richard Lester film starring The Beatles, had its first screening on July 6, 1964. The change I’m talking about was maybe a little earlier, like Philip Larkin’s idea that sexuality was invented in 1963/Between the Beatles and Lady Chatterley. Then again, the first James Bond film _Dr No_—with its song-based score by Monty Norman transformed by John Barry’s arrangement—was released in 1962.

13 George Martin produced all the Beatles records but one (the _Let it Be_ album produced by Phil Spector) as well as songs by many of the artists recording in Britain from the 1960s to the 90s, including Cilla Black, Rolf Harris (_Sun Arise_ and _Tie me Kangaroo Down, Sport_), America, The Mahavishnu Orchestra, Jeff Beck, etc. Other noteworthy producers include: Bob Ezrin (with Alice Cooper), Jerry Wexler (Aretha Franklin), Roy Thomas Baker (Queen, especially _Bohemian Rhapsody_), Jimmy Miller (with The Rolling Stones), Tom Dowd (Coltrane, Mingus, Clapton). These producers, along with other producers, artists, musicians and recording engineers, created the new aesthetic, created the thing that replaced ‘the song’ as the key concept in popular music, that is, the ‘record,’ the ‘track.’

14 There had been previous discussions about the authority or the aptness of one artist’s interpretations of another artist’s songs. In the mid-1950s Pat Boone made a career out of recording versions of black R&B artists’ songs—Fats Domino’s ‘Ain’t That a Shame’ (1955), Little Richard’s ‘Long Tall Sally’ (1956) and ‘Tutti Frutti’ (1955) among many others. Boone’s versions brought this music to a wide audience, but managed to expunge from it any suggestion of sex or wildness.

15 Listed, for example among Premiere Magazine’s _Most Daring Movies Ever Made_ in October 1998 (online at www.filmsite.org/premiere.html) Among the innovations here are Lester’s appropriation of documentary techniques, the choice of camera angles, the camera movement, the unexpected cutting, the delving into inconsequential sub-plots, and particularly Lester’s creation of a ‘sound world’ quite unprecedented, and developed further in his 1965 film _The Knack, And How To Get It._
have anything to do with the content or lyrics of the song. It just has to entertain us while the song plays. It is the birth of the modern video clip.

The repercussions for film were, and are, enormous.

6. Songs Reveal Character

Lawrence Kasdan’s *The Big Chill* (1983, written by Kasdan and Barbara Benedek) begins with the sound of a child being bathed by Harold (Kevin Kline). The child in the bath sings “Jeremiah was a bullfrog” from ‘Joy to the World’ (1970) as his father clicks his fingers in time. Written by Hoyt Axton, and recorded by Three Dog Night and released on their third album, the song reached number one on the Billboard sales charts in 1971, and ended up selling more than one million copies.\(^\text{16}\)

In Axton’s version the lyrics run like this:

\begin{quote}
Jeremiah was a bullfrog  
Was a good friend of mine  
I never understood a single word he said  
But I helped him a-drink his wine...  
Singin’, Joy to the world  
All the boys and girls, now  
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea  
Joy to you and me
\end{quote}

It was a silly song when it came out in 1971, silly and naively sweet. But it sold busloads of records to teenagers. And in 1983’s *The Big Chill*, the generational change is already manifest—the pop song of the 70s has become the child’s song of the 80s. And while we hear the toddler’s version of this song in the film in the bathroom, accompanied by the splashing of water and the father’s encouraging murmurs, in the background the phone rings. Glenn Close comes from another room to take a phone call in the hall. She stands still, in the middle distance, hunched, facing away from us. Something makes the boy and his father turn towards her (and towards us, just off the line of their gaze). She stands facing her family in mid-shot. We see her face, stilled and a tear runs down her cheek. She stands staring at her husband. As we look at her face, the opening notes of Marvin Gaye’s version of ‘I Heard It Through the Grapevine’ (1966) sound; electric keyboards and electric guitar on a minor chord, the drums tapping out the time.

Cut to a pair of socks being pulled up a hairy leg. As the trouser is pulled down over the socks, the title: *The Big Chill*. Cut to a hand twirling a coffee cup on a saucer on a table, as Marvin begins to sing:

\begin{quote}
Ooh I bet you’re wondering how I knew  
About your plans to make me blue
\end{quote}

\(^\text{16}\) The song shares a title with the hymn written by Isaac Watts (based on the Psalm 98) and first published in 1719, which, with music by Lowell Mason, became a hugely popular Christmas carol in 1839.

\begin{quote}
Joy to the world! the Lord is come;  
Let earth receive her King...
\end{quote}
Cut to medium close-up of a woman looking quietly disturbed—she too, we guess, has had the phone call:

*With some other guy you knew before
Two of us guys you know I love you more*

Cut to fingers doing up the buttons on a dress shirt, woman’s fingers on a man’s chest:

*It took me by surprise I must say*

Cut to Jeff Goldblum in a woollen jumper, looking distracted, searching for something:

*When I found out yesterday*

Close-up of his desk, coffee cup, papers and pencils:

*Oh I heard it through the grapevine
Not much longer would you be mine*

In his exasperation, Goldblum snatches at some paper on his desk, throws it away:

*Oh-oh I heard it on the grapevine
And I’m just about to lose my mind.

In the background his wife, aware of his need for help, moves towards the camera/us, and him, finds the thing he is looking for, comforts him with a hug:

*Honey Honey, yeah*

Cut to a woman’s fingers, red painted nails, doing up a man’s belt, a suggestion of intimacy, of a relationship more sexual than those we have seen so far. On the soundtrack the women on the backing vocals sing:

*Heard it on the grapevine not much longer would you be my baby...*

After another number of brief shots, the film cuts to a wide-open field. A man, looking at the field just as we are, turns to help direct traffic arriving in a parking lot. We’ve arrived at the funeral, somewhere in the American Midwest, towards which all these people, these separate lives have been drawn.

This series of suspended moments, orchestrated by the writer/director through the gathering momentum of the well-known song, has kept us in a thrall of unknowingness for the first three minutes of the film. We are trying to piece together the fragmented film narrative while held in train by the rhythm, the timbres, the soulful voice singing to us the parallel sad (sung) narrative of failed love, of rumour and suspicion, as relayed by networks of information. In the song, the information is about love and betrayal. In the film the network spreads the
story of death. To all the characters we have glimpsed just briefly, the images, minimal snatches of dialogue, and ongoing music bring the new information, which in turn, by the end of the sequence, brings these characters together to confront their own pasts, this bringing-together achieved by news of the truncated life of one of their friends.

After this long, sung, introduction are two spoken funeral orations; by the preacher who didn’t know the dead friend, and by Harold, who did. The scene works in a weird way to show how words without music fail these fraught formal situations, cannot come near the truth of the life lamented, nor to the emotions experienced by the people in the church.

After some minutes of these music-less tributes, one of the other friends is announced as being about to play “one of Alex’s favourite songs”. She goes to the church organ and plays the opening chords of ‘You Can’t Always Get What You Want’ (1968), the Rolling Stones song. Again, the fact that this version of the song played here in the church is not the revered artefact itself, the 1965 version produced by Jimmy Miller, is at first the cause of laughter in the group gathered there—laughter caused by recognition of the song as well as by the absence of authenticity. But when the scattering crowd gets into their cars and the church-organ music gives way to the guitars, drums and voices of the original—the Stones version, the version we all know—that segue gives the sense of release that had been lacking: it is as if this music is home, this is truth, this is where the characters can relax, in their cars with the Stones; and we, the audience can relax, with the real thing playing on the soundtrack.

A few minutes later as the friends (in dressing gowns and tee-shirts) talk late at night, Procol Harum’s ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ (1967) plays in the room on the record player. Michael (Goldblum’s character) asks, “Harold, don’t you have any other music, like, er, from this century?”

Harold: There is no other music, not in this house.

Michael: There’s been a lot of terrific music in the last ten years.

Pause

Harold: Like what?

But we, the audience, know, and we knew even then in 1983, that in fact another huge change in music had happened in “the last ten years”. These characters, or most of them, are defined by the music of their pasts. But in the meantime the whole punk movement (with its challenge to the golden age of the baby-boomers), heavy metal, the ‘new wave’, electronic music, disco, had all happened. And it is the filmmaker’s joke with us, the audience, about these people, his characters, through the music they and we are listening to, and through their revealed attitudes to music, including the music we are not listening to, that defines the world of the story.

7. Pop is the New Canon

Procol Harum’s hit song features at the beginning of another noteworthy film of the 1980s, this one from England. Withnail and I (1987) written and directed by Bruce
Robinson and starring Richard E. Grant as Withnail and Paul McGann as I/Marwood, is set in 1969 and in its own 60s way (or rather an 80s memory of the 60s) sets up a tension between classicism and romanticism. That is, if we take classicism to be an art ruled by order, proportion and tradition, and romanticism as the expectation that life (and especially that part of life called art) should be ruled by feeling.

Over the first scenes, on the soundtrack is an alto sax solo from King Curtis’ bluesy version of ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ taken from his album *Live at Fillmore West*. Written by Gary Booker and Keith Reid, and (in a decision forced on Booker and Reid after protracted litigation culminating in a House of Lords judgment) by the band’s organ-player Matthew Fisher, this song in itself contains the tension between pop and classic, not least in its combination of a slowly moving ground bass, with wandering Hammond organ, soul-tinged vocals and enigmatic lyrics. The music has been long regarded as based on JS Bach’s ‘Air on the G String’ (1717-23), or perhaps on ‘Sleepers Awake’ (1731) but it has also been suggested that the music borrows an idea from ‘When a Man Loves a Woman’ (1966) by Percy Sledge.

Within the song, there is already a tension—JS Bach meets Percy Sledge. Now put it with the image: a title superimposed, “Camden 1969”, as Marwood smokes a cigarette, seeming alone while a party of some kind goes on around him. He moves in daylight through a cold blue room, then at night in his darkened room in the flat: he is bored, isolated, disenchanted, miserable. As the music fades he bangs on Withnail’s door, asks him, “Do you want a cup of tea?” Withnail groans, “No”. There is an abrupt cut to bacon and eggs in a frying pan in a café, which slams the sound of the music out and into the crackle of cooking, as the camera pans onto newspaper headlines:

*Moment of fulfilment for local boy who became a woman*
*Nude Au Pair’s secret life*

Marwood runs back to his flat where Withnail greets him:

*Withnail:* I’ve some extremely distressing news... We just ran out of wine. What are we going to do about it?  
*Marwood:* I don’t know... I don’t feel good. My thumbs have gone weird... My heart’s beating like a fat clock! I feel dreadful, I feel really dreadful!  
*Withnail:* So do I. So does everybody. Look at my tongue.

This dialogue, with its elevated comedic hysteria, its brusqueness, its lack of care, concern, politeness or courtesy puts us into the real, takes us out of the world of theatrical wit and into the black world where the characters live.

After seventeen minutes of this laughable misery: the escape. A wrecking ball smashes into a dilapidated chimney-stack, tottering in the grey, dilapidated city. We hear the beginning of Jimi Hendrix’s version of Bob Dylan’s ‘All Along The Watchtower’ (1967), the fluidity of the thick chords on his Fender guitar, the round compressed rolling sound of the amplified strings. And like the smashing down and

---

17 The recording was actually released in 1971, two years after the film is supposedly set—an anachronism we will forgive.

rebuilding of old London on screen Hendrix smashes (with electric love) Dylan’s old folkie strains, rebuilding pop music as he goes, just as King Curtis has redefined Procol Harum at the outset of the film.

The words of the Dylan song put us into a scene on the battlements of a castle, and implicit from that height is the point of view of the landed gentry; the song’s argument is between two characters who seem at one with these princes, businessmen and their women but, we know, are in fact not of that class, nor of the servant class. They are the outsiders, these jokers and thieves, outsiders like the actors and musicians and drug-dealers we have been looking at in the film. But they speak the same language, these outsiders, as the princes. Their speech is highly inflected, dense with meaning and significance. Even Danny the Drug Dealer (Ralph Brown) speaks carefully, shaping his odd sentences with the precision of a pedant.

Withnail and Marwood get into a Jaguar in a back street as Jimi starts to sing:

_There must be some way out of here said the joker to the thief_
_Too much confusion, I can’t get no relief._

They make their way through the roads and Withnail yells at some schoolgirls clustered at a street corner, “Scrubbers!” The girls yell back, “Up yours!”

_Withnail:_

_Businessmen they drink my wine_
_Ploughmen till my earth_

_Withnail:_

_Little tarts they love it._

_None of them along the line_
_Know what any of it is worth_

_Withnail:_

_Look at that: Accident black spot._

_Guitar break. (This guitar break is itself genre-changing!)_

_Withnail (shouting):_ 
_They’re throwing themselves into the road to escape all this hideousness._

_No need to get excited, the thief he kindly spoke_
_There are many here among us who feel that life is just a joke..._

Driving past a bystander, Withnail calls, “Throw yourself into the road darling you haven’t got a chance!”

The comfort of the Jaguar car’s interior contrasts with the bleak rainy streets outside.

_But you and I have been through that, and this is not our fate_
As the car reaches the highway leading out of town:

So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late...

The classic/romantic tension continues up to the last scene. Marwood gets an acting job, cuts his hair, leaves London for the provinces. Withnail, left alone with his unredeemed disaffection, walks in the park, where he recites (perhaps in rehearsal, for an audition of his own, or just because he feels like it) Hamlet’s second act soliloquy:

I have of late, though wherefore I know not,  
Lost all my mirth...

It is a masterful performance. It is as if, through the preceding scenes, through the course of this drama, we are given to see the connection between these strange London youths and Shakespeare’s tormented Danish prince; as if Withnail has placed himself exactly in the position to be able to give the performance of this play that will reveal its truth to his contemporaries. As if the romantic is, in the end, the key to the classical, which the soundtrack has confirmed in its delineation of 1960s pop as the new canon.

8. Song Delights Us

In 1983 I was recommended by a friend for a television show the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was putting together: a 20-part series written by two musicians, Tim Gooding and Joanna Piggott, about some kids starting a band. The series was to be called Sweet and Sour.

I travelled to Sydney, met Jan Chapman, the producer, and Graham Thorburn and Carolyn James, the music researchers. They were very serious about trying to get the music right. They had already commissioned a few songwriters to come up with some material suitable for the band to play, and they had chosen these writers well: Reg Mombassa and Martin Plaza from Mental As Anything, Dave McComb from The Triffids, Jenny Hunter-Brown, Sharon O’Neal (who wrote and sang the title track), Mark Callaghan (Riptides and, later, Gang Gajang) Don Walker and Steve Prestwich (Cold Chisel) as well as Joanna and Tim, the writers of the show. I was to work with Graham ‘Buzz’ Bidstrup, the drummer from The Angels (and later on with Gang Gajang) in the ABC studios. When it came to the music of our time we knew what we were about, this group. What wasn’t so clear was how to make it work in a drama.

Finding that out took about ten months. Getting used to the idea that a filmed story doesn’t often want a whole song, but would usually much rather have one verse and one chorus was a lesson. The collisions between sensibilities were constant. Buzz and I had enjoyed a bit of success as well as the long slog of small gigs, and were sure that we knew how things ‘really were’ in the world of pop and rock music. But this show was about a group that would not be successful, about a charming failure, a group made up of young musicians, some of whom could hardly play their instruments. Co-incidentally, it was taking place during the years of the first decent-sounding drum machines. So amateurs like our fictitious group, The Takeaways, could conceivably make themselves a solid rhythm track that way.
But still the arguments persisted: how amateurish should they be? How pop? Joanna said the Takeaways were so naïve their songs would not even have a middle-eight. But the writers had given me a gift. One character, Martin (David Reyne) was to be a ‘great’ guitar player. This allowed me to develop a sophisticated guitar voice, even though the other instruments had to be played simply. I play guitar myself but, in the interests of making something better than I could imagine, hired Tommy Emmanuel, a virtuosic axeman, to do the extraordinary things only he could do. Between us we made a convincing ‘Martin’.

In the production of the songs Buzz and I tried to keep our work as true to itself as if there were no TV show, as if we were doing it for a record; ‘for real’. As if we were not part of a national broadcaster’s attempt to connect with youth. The strain shows sometimes. But, by the standards of the time, it was a breakthrough of sorts. The show found a significant audience (the entire series was repeated twice in the same year) and ABC Records sold double-platinum albums. And we did it with new songs, rather than by re-packaging already-existing hits. To that extent we were taking a risk, avoiding rather than exploiting familiarity. We were still in the genre of ‘backstage musical,’ still in the conceptual space of the Beatles’ film. In the next decade the ‘song-score’ would develop much further.

Garwood refers to the “use (in Sleepless in Seattle) of the standard pop song as an alternative, or complement, to the underscore, playing on the soundtrack without a visible onscreen source…” (2000: 282) He goes on to explore “the shaping of pop music into a kind of film music (as underscore), paying attention to its deployment in two familiar roles: as a key to understanding what a character may be feeling at a particular moment; and as a type of ‘guide’, suggesting what the viewer should be feeling in relation to a particular moment.” (ibid: emphases in original)

Two years later In Clueless (1995), directed by Amy Heckerling,19 the song-based score shows how filmmakers can now assume an audience’s greater familiarity with the songs of its time. The titles start with a cheesy pop-art version of the Paramount logo as we hear the opening song: ‘Kids in America’, written by Ricky Wilde and Marty Wilde, first released by Kim Wilde in 1982 and performed in this version by The Muffs:

Looking out a dirty old window
Outside the cars in the city go rushing by
I sit here alone and I wonder why

An overhead shot of a open-top jeep full of kids, then a montage of Alicia Silverstone (Cher) walking out of a store wielding shopping bags, then dancing, then with her group of friends again (improbably good-looking, impossibly rich) fooling around in a mall in Beverly Hills, then in swimming costumes by a fountain, then in the jeep again.

Friday night and everyone’s moving
I can feel the heat but it’s soothing anyhow...
I search for the beat in this dirty town.
Downtown the young ones are going
We’re the kids in America
Everybody live for the music-go-round, round, round...

---

19 Music supervisor Karyn Rachtman; music score by David Kitay.
At 00:56 seconds the music fades and Cher says on voiceover, “Actually I have a way normal life for a teenage girl.” David Bowie’s ‘Fashion’ (1980) starts on the soundtrack. Cher continues: “I mean I get up, I brush my teeth and I pick out my school clothes…” There’s a shot of her choosing outfits on her computer screen, matching cartoon skirts with tops and so on, totally bogus in style, design, relation to reality, but functioning quite acceptably as some kind of low-level comedy. While Bowie sings on the soundtrack:

They do it over there but they don’t do it here
Oh-oh! Fashion...

At 01:25 the song fades out. In 30 seconds, it has established the film’s credentials. Cher tells us in voiceover, “Daddy’s a litigator...” Almost immediately the next track starts. As Cher argues with her dad (he tells her, to her disgust, that her step-brother [Paul Rudd] will be visiting), and the No Doubt song ‘Just a Girl’ (1995), written by Gwen Stefani and Tom Dumont begins, at first softly but gradually fading up.

Don’t you think I know
Exactly where I stand
This world is forcing me
To hold your hand
‘Cause I’m just a girl, little ol’ me
Don’t let me out of your sight
I’m just a girl, all pretty and petite
So don’t let me have any rights
Oh...I’ve had it up to here!

There are multiple distances established; the distance between the lyrics of this song, its title, and the band who sings it. As everyone who pays attention to pop culture knows, this band No Doubt are not a quiescent complaisant presence. As established through their videos they have a challenging presence—the Mohawk haircuts and tattoos, the punk-cut jeans and tee shirts of their drummer, the insistent bald head of the guitar player, and above all, in the assertive sassy blonde persona of the singer Gwen Stefani. When she sings, “I’m just a girl, little ol’ me” we may take this statement with some ironical salt. And when we see this irony framed by the visual image of the conservatively-dressed, politically-ignorant, conventionally-attractive Cher of Clueless we are presented with irony on irony. Which serves nevertheless to remind us never to underestimate the power and resources of a teenage girl.

After one minute the song fades out. We’re two and a half minutes into the picture and we’ve had three bits of songs; enough of the songs to tell what the songs are, to identify this group of friends, its time and place, its milieu, and (broadly speaking) its attitudes, and, what’s more, to identify the filmmakers (because the songs on the soundtrack define the authors of the film as well as the characters in it). There follows some forty-five seconds without a song, then, as Dionne’s boyfriend approaches, a snatch of the Salt-n-Pepa song ‘Shoop’ (1993) is heard. Not much of it: simply the riff and the single word “Shoop”. Just nine seconds of this song is enough for the reference to have its effect. The pace of the referencing system is frenetic. Keep up or forget it.
The use of song on this film is a triumph, and the triumph must belong to that much-derided functionary, the Music Supervisor; in this case Karyn Rachtman. Composers tend not to like music supervisors, and often with good reason. The power shift from written music to ‘supervised’ music has been a real and painful blow to the status and authority of the score composer. And there are many so-so music supervisors who are in fact little more than touts for a record label (or music publishers or agents for their own roster of artists). A good music supervisor is worth gold. It is not a case of ‘anyone good at the business of clearances can do this’. Yes, you have to deliver the clearance, that is, the synchronisation licence, but the right music supervisor for a project is expert in the music that that project needs. And that’s who, as a filmmaker, you want choosing, or offering to the director the choice of, the music.

Some directors make their own choices. Quentin Tarantino’s very personal taste in the popular music of the last sixty years has given his films a unique edge. It’s the specificity of his music—The Delltones in *Jackie Brown* (1997), Dick Dale’s ‘Misirlou’ (1962), Dusty Springfield’s ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ (1968), Chuck Berry’s ‘You Never Can Tell’ (1963) in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Steeler’s Wheel’s ‘Stuck in the Middle With You’ (1972) in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992).

David Lynch has a similarly personal style. Lynch has provided some of the more memorable music moments on film in the last twenty years. Nothing, for me, matches the scene of Rebekah Del Rio in the Club Silencio sequence in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) singing in Spanish the old Roy Orbison song ‘Crying’ (1962). It’s not just the quality of the performance, both vocal and visual, or the quality of the sound, but the commitment to the song, from both singer and filmmaker, which is obvious. The fact that the film narrative simply suspends itself for these few minutes (with Betty and Rita—Naomi Watts and Laura Elena Harring—squirming in their seats then hammily crying) doesn’t bother me a bit. That song transcends, for me, any reason for it being there or not being there. It’s a moment of pure pleasure. And that’s the other reason for having a song, or any music, in film: because we like it. It delights us.

9. The Groove is Not for Everyone

I started songwriting at around 16 years old. I wanted to write songs because I liked what other songwriters were doing: Ray Davies, Pete Townshend, Chuck Berry. Bob Dylan’s work demonstrated that a woman mentioned in a lyric does not have to be the love interest of the singer, that there are many possible relationships between the singer and the subject of the song. And there was Lennon and McCartney, BB King and Bo Diddley, Jimi Hendrix, Brian Wilson, Frank Zappa, and somewhere in the background, Cole Porter and Jerome Kern. I learned by sitting with a guitar and working out as best I could what the songwriters I liked were doing, then trying to do something in similar vein.

The discovery of the 12-bar blues as a template into which you could throw any story, any feeling, was a revelation to me. But even more when I realised that Howlin’ Wolf’s 12-bar blues could in fact be 10 bars or 11 or even 11-and-a-half bars long. The song’s form was whatever he felt like. The form did not rule. The

---

20 Discussed at length in Herzog, 2009, in which the writer posits the popular song as inserting a Deleuzian ‘difference’ into the film.
function ruled, and the function was to accompany and give shape to the story, give space for the feeling.

But one of the hardest things to come to grips with when I was starting to write scores was the problem of rhythm. Popular music is based on beats that are more or less constant for the length of a song, whereas orchestral music has a rhythmic flexibility well suited to the ebb and flow of drama. An editor said to me, ‘One reason we don’t like drumkits in a film score is that you’ll end up at the end of the scene exactly where you were at the beginning.’ Gdang! It was like a lightning flash. The rubato of the studio composers, the loosening and tightening of the beat, as well as the accelerandi and decelerandi of the tempo were what made those scores fit so naturally into the rhythms of thought, of action and of feeling. Those old scores felt organic, the new scores that we were doing felt forced, constraining our scenes and our characters into the straightjacket of the groove.

The solution, as I should have seen immediately, is to abandon the grid. Just as John Lee Hooker added half a bar whenever his lyric seemed to need it, so modern film composers add or subtract a beat or two to any bar to make the grid fit the picture. So, for instance, where Miklos Rosza (say) at a critical moment would slow his orchestra down through a four/four bar to make the music seem to expand into the space-time of his character’s thought, we now tend to add a beat at the same tempo, making a five/four bar to fit the moment. It’s an overtly technical solution to the problem but it works.

Though sometimes it is the fixedness of the groove that works. Sometimes the groove is the thing standing outside the story that the characters can retreat to in order to find themselves, or the audience can locate the characters in. Song in film enacts a parallel narrative on the same stage. This second narrative, happening in time but in an invisible space, adds another dimension to the audience’s apperception, another possibility for the filmmaker to add colour, reflection, comment or even critique to the rest of the mise-en-scène.

Richard Dyer discusses this in relation to the film Car Wash (Michael Schultz, 1976):

Car Wash belongs to a tradition of black films that show black people using music, going back to it to pick it up when they need it... It is, however, not just characters who do this, but the narration of the film itself.

He quotes James A Snead’s contrast of white culture’s linear development, and black culture’s repetition and circularity:

In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is ‘there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it.’(Cited in Dyer, 2010: 147)

Music in films like this, he says, is the thing in people’s heads.21

---

21 As it is in Curtis Mayfield’s song-score for Super Fly (1972) and Isaac Hayes’ for Shaft (1971) and many other films based in that culture. See also Howell’s notion that Earth Wind and Fire’s music in Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971) “does not progress in the sense a melodic line would...there is no end in sight” (cited in Dyer, 2010: 163).
Characters dip in and out of the thing in their ear, as does the narration of the film itself. (ibid: 147)

As white popular culture continues to borrow, appropriate and increasingly rely on black culture, then the tension between the ongoing repetitive groove of young people’s music and the linear development of story, between the fixedness of contemporary music’s rhythms and the ebb and flow of screen characters’ emotions, will surely become ever more tricky to negotiate. Just as the tension between the obvious artificiality of a written score and the desire of the filmmaker to have his/her story-world seem not artificial but authentic will grow more marked.

The future, then, seems to mean less score, and more song. And more films without music at all. This perhaps explains the popularity of Philip Glass. When you don’t really want music for its individual affect you end up with Glass: chameleon-like yet uniquely identifiable, highly developed but utterly predictable, endlessly malleable but formally complete, and seemingly already-existing within itself. It is the answer to the Anglo-European filmmakers’ problems, the ur-music in (white) people’s heads. It’s the ultimate sex-less groove.

10. Songs Make Life Easier for Directors and Producers

To the person watching a film and often to the person writing about a film the director is a creator: godlike in his/her ability to fashion a world out of imagination. To the person working on a film the director is not like that. Once the shooting starts the director is more like the first audience. When a production designer has an idea for a set or an interior s/he shows it to the director and observes the reaction. When an actor in rehearsal or in front of the camera does a little certain something with mouth or fingers s/he is interested first of all in what the director thinks of that little detail of performance. The director stands for the observing world. Yes, s/he may have originated the whole thing, may be the writer-director-demiurge of legend, but on set or in the studio the director is ultimately concerned with what an audience will make of it all, calibrates his/her own feelings through the imagined audience. So it is with music. Most directors don’t write music. They describe what they want and then react to what you’ve done. There’s an awkwardness in that exchange sometimes. That’s another reason why so many of them reach for already existing songs: they already know what they think about them.

Apart from that, it took me a while to recognise that the director often does not want, is not impressed by, the artful weave of a single piece of music into the fabric of story. The director sometimes wants (as Welles preferred to Mancini’s score) the jangled tatters of many different musics; like the shifting moods of a crowded club, pub, café or diner when there’s a different song on the jukebox every three minutes: an effect that is very hard (though not impossible) to achieve with a written score.

I co-wrote with Bill Motzing music for the original version of Young Einstein (Yahoo Serious, 1984). I took care of the contemporary music bits (the guitary, drummy, synthy bits) while Bill did the orchestral bits. We won the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Music that year. But when the film was refinanced, and subsequently reshot (in parts), re-edited and remixed, the filmmakers replaced
much of my score with pop songs from the Mushroom catalogue, mainly, I think for the twin sakes of variety and recognisability. The pain and annoyance I felt about this lasted quite a while. But now that it confirms my observation on the modern tendency to turn directors into *bricoleurs*, and cinemas into jukeboxes, I don’t feel so bad.

In 1988, producer John Edwards asked me to do music for his 8-part TV series *Stringer*. The story followed a pugnacious English journalist in Sydney (Derek O’Connor) digging up stories, getting into trouble, pursuing ludicrous business ventures with a taxi driver (Nick Papademetriou) and the musical conceit was that whenever the stringer was alone he listened to ‘girl-groups’. We decided to put together our own ‘girl-group’ and persuaded two wonderful singers, Kate Ceberano and Wendy Matthews, to be the girls. The songs were a mixture of standards (by Curtis Mayfield, Jerome Kern, and Mickey Newbury), original commissions (from Don Walker and Dave Dobbyn) and a few that I wrote or adapted for the show. It was all recorded beforehand, and that way the songs *already existed*.22

There was no doubt in this method about what was the right way to score the scene. The song either worked or it didn’t. Luckily for me it mostly did. The band we put together was one of the best I’ve ever worked with: Ricky Fataar (drums), Joe Creighton (bass), Max Lambert (piano), Kenny Kitching (pedal steel) and Rex Goh (guitars). Michael Stavrou engineered a warm, clean sound in the ABC studios on William Street. Writing these words now I’m conscious of the gap between practice and theory, between the doing of a music score and the critical consideration of it. *Who plays bass?* is probably not of much concern to the theorists of film but, to anyone making the sort of music I do, it’s one of the first questions to ask—along with *where are we mixing?*—because it is the texture of the sound that, to me, is critical in music. The timbre and touch, the weave and sinew, and, added to that, the players, along with sympathetic recording and mixdown engineers, are vital. Production practices, technical specifications, are usually a given. Not many filmmakers want to innovate when it comes to the soundtrack. But within the given the composer will strive to find the new thing. And the new thing, once done, influences everybody else.

In a way it’s odd, this bias against musical innovation on the part of producers and directors, because, as Amy Herzog points out, it is precisely the ‘musical moment’ that allows the film to break with tradition. Music, she says, can ‘rupture’ the sense of spatial and temporal logic that rules narrative, allowing a sense of ‘difference’ to intervene through its repetitions (2009: 8). The problem is, to achieve the transcendental experience that marks out your film as special, you have to surrender your film to the music, to “invert the image-sound hierarchy” (ibid: 7). This can be scary. No wonder only a few ground-breakers (François Ozon, Jean-Luc Godard, David Lynch and their like) take the plunge. And no wonder, when it is done by less adventurous talents, this ‘surrender’ tends to rely on well-known, popular, easily-recognisable songs.

In the song-score there are a few innovators:

Henry Mancini wrote many songs (*Moon River* for *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* [Blake Edwards, 1961] most famously) but it is not his songs that have made him

---

22 For Jan Chapman’s ABC mini-series *Come In Spinner* (1989) we had similarly solid narrative-based reasons for much of the music.
essential, more how he used song structure in his scores. Lalo Schifrin (1994) said that when he heard Mancini’s theme for the TV series *Peter Gunn* he thought to himself, “I can do that,” and he immediately left Paris for the United States. And he did ‘do that’ or rather, what he did was adapt that technique to his own, and build on it.

Mancini liked to combine bluesy solo guitar figures over simple repetitive jazzy rhythms punctuated by massed brass chordal stabs and wails; or else cool bass and drum patterns with solo horn. Plas Johnson’s tenor solo on Henry Mancini’s *Pink Panther* theme (Blake Edwards, 1963) for example, created a new fusion of styles that has proven timeless. Schifrin’s development of this tendency was to combine funky electric bass and tight clipped soul drumming with string clusters of crushed chords, the whole reinforced by brass and horn stabs and augmented with soloistic woodwinds. To say Mancini influenced Schifrin does not make Schifrin any less. That’s just how music develops. One thing, once heard, makes another thing possible.

Jack Nitzsche was Phil Spector’s orchestrator (notably for *River Deep Mountain High*, 1966), The Rolling Stones’ piano player (1965-1968), Neil Young’s producer (1968-1970, including *Harvest*), and a record producer through the 1970s, before he became a film composer. He wrote scores for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman, 1979), *The Razor’s Edge* (John Byrum, 1984), *Nine 1/2 Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986), *The Hot Spot* (Dennis Hopper, 1990), *The Indian Runner* (Sean Penn, 1991), *The Crossing Guard* (Sean Penn, 1995) and forty or so others. Don’t worry about the song ‘Up Where We Belong’, which he co-wrote for *An Officer and A Gentleman* (Taylor Hackford, 1982). In Hopper’s *The Hot Spot*, Nitzsche’s combination of Miles Davis and John Lee Hooker sets up a score that draws on the core history of American popular culture while providing a set of possibilities for film music for the next ten or twenty years.

Jon Brion constructed, for Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999), a score based on and including the songs of Aimee Mann, and then extended her themes into an original suturing continuous texture that played through and connected the multiple storylines. For Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) he created an extraordinary score made up of many fragmented elements and based around song structures which somehow came together at the end of the film, with Beck singing the 1980 James Warren song ‘Everybody’s Got to Learn Sometime’ (1980) which, in turn, revealed that song, that sentiment, as a generative seed for the whole film.

**Conclusion**

Songs as self-contained works of art have their own authority. They exist in the world whether film exists or not. Film scores—music composed purely to serve the film—exist only dependent on and contingent to the film. There will still be plenty of written scores for horror and thriller genre films, for science fiction and action-adventure movies. But film loves song—because audiences know songs, or at least they remember them for a while. This means that the choice of song can define a film, its characters and its makers. Given the audience familiarity with the canon of popular music, the combination of song and score—especially of song-worked-into score—deployed with the necessary technique and artistry, gives composers and filmmakers an unrivalled tool; a sonic shortcut, an instant connect between their
films and the lives of their audiences. In the dark public room that is cinema, in the eternal night where filmed stories are told, music triggers memory so that the viewer becomes listener, and the listener, through the song, has already experienced the feeling-state that the viewer is entering for the first time. These songs, slivers of music, tiny shards of memory, provide gateways from our fictitious constructs, our imperfect analogies of the real, to those myriad unknowable lives—the lives of the audience—that are our subject and our destination.

References


