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EDITORIAL
Soundtracks across media, genre & series

Natalie Lewandowski

This Screen Sound 2015 issue features a collection of articles that address the theme of soundtracks across media, genre and series. Each of the articles exemplifies how, despite varied media outputs, those working on the films have similarities in approach, marketing and execution. Historically, as demonstrated in Johnson’s article, the marketing of national interests and progress were intertwined with the audio and visual text. In the articles which examine more recent texts, Hart, Hayward and Hill, Giuffre and Evans all demonstrate how across various media the music continues to provide a link across series, brand or auteur (in the case of Chris Lilley). Lastly, Johnson’s interview with Screen Composer Graeme Perkins illustrates how working within the industry requires flexibility in compositional techniques and style, even within the one media output of documentary.

Screen Sound Update

The Editorial team has changed to include Natalie Lewandowski as Editor, and Philip Hayward as Deputy Editor. Our site editor and designer, Alex Mesker will be taking leave from working on Screen Sound to work on his thesis on sound and music in Hanna-Barbera’s cartoons. I’d like to thank Alex for all of his work on Screen Sound Journal since its inception. From 2016, Screen Sound will be published in a ‘special issue’ format, reflecting the changing editorial board and aligning with significant organisations and events to do with all matters sound and screen in Australasia. We would welcome affiliation with panels, conferences and events in order to collaborate on outcomes. Screen Sound is pleased to receive comments on its articles, direction and scope from researchers in diverse fields relevant to Australasian screen sound.

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‘WE CAN’T SLEEP IN THE MOVIES ANY MORE’
Talkies and the Legitimization of Australian Jazz

Bruce Johnson

Abstract

My interest in this essay is not so much in the way improvised music might be deployed in film, as in the way it has been represented. More specifically, I wish to investigate a transformation in the cinematic representation of the most durable and influential improvised music of the twentieth century: jazz. It is the transformation of jazz from being a despised foreigner to becoming a respected citizen, and this transformation took place in virtually every international diasporic destination. This enquiry began with the question: how and why did jazz, a music identified so closely with both ‘primitive’ blackness, and with US modernity, become assimilated to national identities in most of its diasporic destinations by the late twentieth century? In almost all those destinations jazz was initially regarded as deeply disruptive to the traditions on which local identity was built, yet within decades became fully at home in these diasporic ‘marginal’ sites. How was this radical reversal achieved?

Keywords

Jazz, improvisation, diaspora, The Sydney Harbour Bridge

When jazz first arrived in Australia towards the end of the First World War, it carried messages that were for many deeply offensive to the idea of ‘Australia’. These included its African or ‘negroid’ connections. The statement in the July 1918 issue of Australian Variety and Show World that jazz is “a Negro expression for noise, peculiar to music” (cited Johnson, 1987: 4) establishes jazz as an enemy to civilisation and refinement. For what appears to have been the world’s first jazz festival, the Jazz Week held at the Globe Theatre in Sydney in 1919, the publicity reflected a belief that jazz signalled the decline of western civilisation: Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction? The answer was clearly and defiantly yes (an early example of the marketing of transgressive alternativity). As in most diasporic sites, jazz was a bearer of a modernity that

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1 I wish to acknowledge with thanks the research fellowships awarded to me for two successive years, 2008 and 2009, by Australia’s National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), and which provided me with access to the material I use in this essay. This article develops several of the lines of enquiry that emerged from those Fellowships in a paper for NFSA Journal (see Johnson 2009), and a conference paper presented at The Jazz Chameleon: The 9th Nordic Jazz Conference held at the Finnish Jazz & Pop Archive, Helsinki, August 19–20, 2010.
threatened local traditions and received values. Decadent and transgressive, its association with extravagant modern dance and the young female flapper carried the suggestion of degraded effeminisation. This had particular implications in a country that was so strongly masculinised. The extraordinary imbalance between the numbers of men compared to women from the beginning of European settlement (Blainey, 2003: 336) strengthened the masculinisation that is characteristic of frontier societies. National character was defined through rural narratives of outdoor labour through which a man realised his spirit and resourcefulness. The city on the other hand softened and feminised, exposing one to the depraved imported contamination of ‘jazz parties’. This dichotomy provided a structuring device in narratives of nation, particularly early film: the young country woman lured like a moth to the city or the young man throwing away his talents as a prodigal urban wastrel. Both risked destruction at jazz parties, but were then saved by a return to the solid values of the bush tradition that underpinned all that was heroic in national identity. Australia’s early prolific feature film output thus became a medium for the negotiation between jazz and national identity, the latter most frequently articulated through the values of the bush.

Film was a particularly effective forum for constructing and circulating these narratives. As a technology born with the twentieth century, film was among the most effective vehicles for messages about the modern world. For Australians it was from its beginnings one of the most powerful ways through which the collective consciousness was internationalised. In the earliest period there was a far greater range of foreign films exhibited than later became the norm as the US achieved dominance (Collins, 1987:46). Reviewing a film of the streets of Budapest in 1909, The Bulletin commented that it enabled people to attend “feeling quite suburban, and come away feeling wholly cosmopolitan” (cited Collins, 1987:42). Yet at the same time, the growing popularity of American westerns was, it was noted by the British vice-consul partly because the settings reminded Australians of their own “bush life” (Collins, 1987:46). It is easy to forget how close historically Australians were to the frontier experience in the early years of cinema. In 1923 an eighty-nine year old woman from rural Queensland reported that she made a special point of going to see the US film The Covered Wagon because it reminded her of “her pioneering days” (Collins, 1987:65). In the peak year of Australian film production, 1911, “the favourite subject was bushranging” (Collins, 1986:51).

The popularity of cinema as an influence on the Australian imaginary has been amply documented. In 1921, entertainment receipts from movie attendances outnumbered by more than four times those for both theatre and horseracing combined (Collins, 1987:3), and during the 1920s in a population of just over six million, there were over some two and a quarter million attendances each week (Collins, 1987:17); “on a per capita basis, Australians were once the keenest filmgoers in the world” (Collins, 1987:4). And as Pike and Cooper’s overview demonstrates, from the pre-WW1 period through the 1920s, they had an abundance of home grown product that was still not matched by the late 1970s (Pike and Cooper, 1998). While the movie-going demographic embraced all classes (Collins, 1987:19), it was women who made up the great majority. With the weakening of Victorian constrictions, and new infrastructures ranging from public transport to street lighting, with the increase of women in the work force – giving them both a greater measure of economic independence and assured hours of leisure – women enjoyed increasing mobility in every sense. A witness in the 1912 Piddington enquiry
into female factory labour declared that “The first thing a girl does on leaving a factory is to clear home, swallow a cup of tea and go out to a picture show” (cited Collins, 1987:24). According to the royal commission into film of 1927, women constituted seventy per cent of Australian cinema audiences, further encouraged by special matinees with crèche facilities, pioneered in 1910 by the exhibitor J. D. Williams who advertised his theatre as a “ladies’ rendezvous” (Collins, 1987:23). It reflects the association between young women and progressive modernity that the women’s toilets in the dress circle of a number of opulent cinemas were labelled ‘Futurists’ (Collins, 1987:116). It is incidentally also significant that the equivalent in the stalls were marked ‘Butterflies’ — there are instructive extrapolations to be drawn about both class and gender politics in the cinema, that the stalls woman was seen through this common trope of the flighty modern city girl (as celebrated for example in Chauvel’s film Moth of Moombi (Charles Chauvel, 1926) the companion film to his Greenhide (Charles Chauvel, 1926) discussed below).

Movie publicity was also heavily targeted at women, both through explicit advertising and in collateral channels as in movie journals, from Australasian Moving Picture (1913) to Women’s Weekly, launched in 1933 and including regular film fare that covered life style from clothing to cooking (Collins, 1987: 172, 175).

At the movies the young female could explore the full range of possibilities and choices that were increasingly opening up to the New Woman. One of the common scenarios in Australian films of the 1920s was the set of moral and ethical dilemmas arising from a new range of life-style possibilities during post-war social emancipation, particularly in relation to gender politics (see further Johnson, 2000:69). The ‘modern woman’ as portrayed in Australian film increasingly transgressed into and threatened sites of male power, and she did so to the sound of jazz. An advertisement for the 1926 film Should a Girl Propose? informed the reader that, “The modern Girl jazzes, smokes, indulges in athletes [sic], enters law and politics, and, in short, does most things a man does, and in most things does better” (Pike and Cooper, 1998:131). The reference to “jazzes” reminds us that this was the music of modernity and transgression — and also that it was a verb that applied to what was in Australia a highly gendered activity, dancing. In the 1920s, jazz was the music that embodied the dangerous glamour of urban modernity and the threat it presented to masculine bush-based myths of Australian identity.

Thus it functioned in the 1926 film Greenhide, which is traversed by all the lines of force I have been sketching. The heroine of the film is a young city girl, Margery Paton, described in a press synopsis as “the only child of old Sam — her mother died when she was a child. She, of course, is heiress to all the Paton stations. Margery is almost of an ultra modern type, and is just passing through the chocolate cream and ‘sheik’ stage”2. The reference to “sheik” is in itself an intertextual testimony to the extent to which cinema infiltrated social discourse. It derived ultimately from the publication in 1919 of the ‘lust in the dust’ novel The Sheik by English writer Edith Maude Hull. But it was the 1921 film starring the ill-fated Rudolph Valentino that gave the word currency as an evocation of sexual experience. The film was massively influential on the imagination of young women, and nowhere more so than in

2 The ‘Music and Drama’ section of Figaro, incorporating Punch, Flashes and Bohemian (Brisbane), Saturday 29 November 1926. This is held by NFSA as part of its press file on the film. Other quotes regarding Greenhide are from the same file, though not all are fully sourced.
Australia, where its six-month run at The Globe in Sydney was a world record (Collins, 1987:56). Inspired by this image, Margery hatches a plot to spend time at Walloon, her father’s distant cattle station, to sample the “elemental” life, and hoping to be “sheiked by a bushranger” as one inter-title has it. The image of the bush in this film must be noted in relation to the transformations I chart in the course of this essay. Apart from the imagery in what survives of the film as held by NFSA (National Film and Sound Archive), the publicity provided graphic foretastes. From Figaro again: “It was a bachelor station, and tough; where anything not known to recognised law could happen, and at any time”. And the embodiment of this rugged spirit was the station manager, Gavin, aka Greenhide for his toughness, “the embodiment of all that the real West stood for — strength, wholesomeness and positive magnetism”. In another advertisement for the movie, we read:

*Primitive man he was — but big and handsome and — oh, she’d tamed a dozen men before! .... But Margery Paton found more difficulty in taming Greenhide than he found in breaking a lashing, kicking devil-horse to his iron will!*

In the meantime we see her conducting herself as a frivolous young flapper, idly strumming a ukulele, eating chocolate, or holding a garden party for her equally frivolous girlfriends at which she performs a lengthy improvised solo dance in front of the jazz band that is entertaining them. As ‘the jazz’ was at that time understood to be a dance (like ‘the tango’, ‘the waltz’), this means that in effect this young woman was acting out her liberated progressiveness by performing a jazz solo (see further Johnson, 2000:69–76). Dancing also features in what little footage remains of Chauvel’s companion film *Moth of Moonbi*, released a few months earlier. Dell Ferris, a young country girl goes to the city in search of the ‘liberty and happiness she had read of in books’. She falls into a social circle of pointless and self-indulgent decadence, summarized in a seduction line from a young man on a yacht: “Why try to understand the present — life is so short and full of good times — come let us dance”. Only when Dell returns to the country “where she belonged”, does she finally find “sanctuary” (see further Johnson, 2000:69–76). Similar antitheses between decadent jazz-drenched urban modernity and the solid decency of the bush are to be found in other films of the period, including *Tall Timber* which, although never completed, still exists as a rough shooting script in NFSA (see further Johnson, 2009).

Although jazz or ‘jazzing’ (dancing) was clearly a relatively cheap and popular recreation, its association with decadent irresponsibility is confirmed by its location in these films. Margery’s highly indulged urban lifestyle is parasitic upon her father’s rurally based wealth, a parable of a larger mythology: that is the cities as parasitically living off rural labour. The distance between the sites of material production and aimless consumption is both literal and cultural, enacted in the unproductive self-indulgence of Margery’s jazz party, while her father is seen working in the garden. At this stage in the cinematic imagination there is no exchange between jazz and the nation-building labour of the bush. At best, jazz belongs to a world of unproductive and over-indulgent consumption. At worst, it is the music of moral degradation, from which it was necessary to rescue its devotees and restore them to decent

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3 The shooting script was rather bolder, adding the words ‘or two’, which were also retained in some of the press publicity as held by NFSA.
Australian values. In cinematic representations, jazz and the ideal of nation are unambiguously opposed over this early period in the history of the music in Australia, and given the broader cultural significance of jazz, this relationship is instructive to any attempt to study the evolution of the sense of Australian identity.

Yet from the end of the Second World War Australian identity and the bush mythology increasingly converged with jazz, and indeed by the end of the 1950s, they would be well on the way towards an active synergy. I want to turn to a preliminary account of the beginnings of this transition, and some hypotheses as to why and how it occurred. Jazz was the music of a modernity originally seen as decadent, especially in opposition to the bush tradition and the agricultural sector that had sustained both our economy and our national mythology. The rehabilitation of jazz was enabled by two significant socio-cultural shifts. From the onset of the Great Depression in October 1929, income from wool and wheat exports collapsed. With public expenditure slashed, Australia's unemployment rate rose until it became the world's second highest after Germany. Australia had relied on the flow of agricultural exports and this now let them down. This contributed to several shifts in orientation. First, the growing recognition that Australia's future lay in the highly technologised secondary industry sector and public works investment. Second, a sense that there therefore needed to be some rapprochement between the city and the bush. One of the major tropes of this legitimation of modernisation within the discourses of nation was to be found in the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The Bridge represented and enabled a new sense of national cohesion, as the Mayor of North Sydney declared at the turning of the first sod on 28 July 1923:

> The direct route to Queensland, the northern towns and districts of New South Wales will be via the bridge, our northern shores will be requisitioned for shipping, then our manufacturers and other commercial pursuits will follow, to say nothing of the opening up of large areas of residential lands’ (cited in Lalor, 2006:89)

As construction proceeded into the parlous times of the Great Depression, the importance of the Bridge in alleviating unemployment led to its being referred to as the Iron Lung (Lalor, 2006:321). The Bridge connected the city with the northern regions up to Queensland, enabled the development of commerce and manufacturing, and embodied a shift towards a unified modern economy. A nine or ten year old boy from a remote farm decided to ride his horse hundreds of kilometres to Sydney for the opening. In his highly publicised pilgrimage, two extreme strands in the Australian identity converged: the tradition of the enterprising bush pioneer, and the growing importance of industrial modernity; primary and secondary industry, the rural and the urban — and in a young boy who represented the future.

At the same time the Bridge brought to a head tensions between conservative and radical forces that shook Australia in the early years of the Depression. Given the parlous times, the New South Wales political leader, Jack Lang, refused to honour massive debts to the UK, and to forestall any attempt by the Commonwealth to seize the money, physically emptied the banks and hid the money a week before the opening of the Bridge. This placed him not only
at odds with the nation’s Prime Minister, but also with the far right fascist organisation known as the New Guard, who therefore planned to kidnap Lang and mount an armed insurrection. A member of the New Guard, Francis de Groot, declared that what was at issue was the Australian “way of life”, and the opening of the Bridge became the occasion at which these conflicts crystallised. Lang planned to open the Bridge himself, rather than His Royal Majesty’s representative, the Governor General (“It’s our show, not his”, declared Lang — cited Lalor, 2006:314 — opening up issues of nationalism versus imperialism). On the day De Groot, in military uniform, pre-empted Lang by galloping on horseback (a telling symbol itself) to cut the opening ribbon with a sabre. There was much more at stake here than the opening of a new piece of public infrastructure. The Sunday Times in London announced that Australia had come of age:

_Standing where the first settlers erected their huts in 1788, it is both a superb achievement and symbol of another superb achievement – the making of a nation._ (cited in Lalor, 2006:334)

The importance of the Bridge in the national imaginary is confirmed by an intensive viewing of Australian feature films of the late 1920s to early 1930s, where its insistent image is entangled with other forces in the development of the Australian film industry, the idea of Australia, and the location of jazz. This image of a bridge under development is, along with a shift in the representation of jazz, a metaphor of a significant transition in the discourses of nation. _The Cheaters_ was one of a number of films made during the shift from silent to sound film. The surviving versions reflect the intensity of this transitional moment in Australian cultural history. It was completed as a silent in 1929, and extra footage with sound-on-disc was shot in March 1930. Its first trade screening was in June 1930. Yet although the extra footage was supposedly shot in Melbourne, following an inter-title “20 Years of progress” there is a shot of the gap that would later be filled by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with some construction work apparently about to start, followed by a shot of the Bridge nearing completion. Yet the Bridge did not reach that stage of completion until at least three to six months after the first trade screenings in June 1930. That means that the makers added this footage after the trade screenings (see further Johnson, 2009). To take so much post-production trouble to introduce this image of ‘progress’ proclaims the way Australia was re-imagining itself as an industrialised, modernised urban society.

Two other films in which the new bridge was given striking prominence were _Showgirl’s Luck_ (Norman Dawn, 1931) and _The Squatter’s Daughter_ (Ken Hall, 1933) In the former the image of the bridge was smuggled in at the post-production stage, while in the latter the camera lingers on it as a component in a potential new era of nation-building prosperity. In both cases, although prominent, it was entirely surplus to the basic requirements of the plot (see further Johnson, 2009). In the present context it is highly suggestive that these two films also draw together three elements that structure _Greenhide:_ the independent New Woman, jazz and the encounter between tradition and modernity. But they do so in a way that manifests a very different valency. Along with the medium of cinema itself, the New Woman and jazz embodied urban modernity in terms of technology, gender and music. As such, up to the end of the 1920s, they represented a convergent threat to all that was embodied in traditional values, especially as symbolised by the bush. But then came the Great Depression, which happened to coincide with the
transition to talkies and with the massive capital investment in the Harbour Bridge. It is conventionally believed that the Depression chastened the ‘roaring twenties’, and to an extent that is in fact so – the parlous and in many ways more austere times, saw the decline of the ‘jazz age’, in the sense it had been understood in the previous decade. But at the same time, modernisation began to appear as the potential saviour of the country. The old mythic centres were challenged: the rural economy and its heroes (above all, the labouring male) had not in themselves proven to be adequate to sustain the economy. Some kind of reconciliation with modernity was needed.

But there were also important changes going on in the embodiments of modernity itself. The fecklessness of the independent New Woman gave way to a more responsible image, especially as she became increasingly the centre of the family, even if only psychologically and logistically, in an era of massive male unemployment and the absent husband trekking for work. Technology, secondary industry and urban infrastructure, especially as represented by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, became the potential economic salvation of the country. And the music of modernity — jazz — achieved a greater gravitas. One of the reasons was that its more vaudevillian excesses and its emotional shallowness were being dissipated by increased exposure to the source material through recordings and films. Until the early 1930s, most of what was available as ‘jazz’ in Australia was very distant from the ‘classic’ corpus that had been produced by King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong through the 1920s. It was rhythmically and harmonically limited and its emotional range generally confined to good time ‘pep’ or novelty items (see further Johnson, 1987:3–13). The ‘classic’ body of work was only becoming available in Australia from the 1930s as well as by being mediated via the increasingly sophisticated and urbane popular music corpus, which would incorporate jazz effects (syncopation, blues scales, timbral ambiguities and modernist lyrics) to new compositions by such composers as Gershwin and Porter, whose music was also being heard on sound film. There was, however, a more indirect but equally powerful connection between the legitimisation of jazz and the coming of sound to cinema, and I shall now turn to this.

Whatever its level of perceived artistic merit, jazz and improvisational music-making had always been associated to a greater or lesser extent with the cinema. At the most obvious level, in smaller cinemas where the film was accompanied only by a solo pianist, much of the music was improvisational in the sense that the performer (and, it is worth noting, it would most likely be a woman), was often responding ad hoc to the images on the screen, with what might be called unplanned musical collage or pastiche (see Whiteoak, 1999:14, 66). But jazz itself was also an explicit element in the music for silent movies. In the synopsis notes for Greenhide, Chauvel suggested that the song ‘That Certain Party’ be played by the pianist over the garden party scene in which Margery dances to the jazz band, a song that had been recorded only two months earlier by the visiting US hot dance band the Royal Palais Californians which was billed as the latest thing in jazz (see further Johnson 2000:72). But apart from this special purpose number, jazz was evidently a ubiquitous component in silent film accompaniment. The movies themselves were described as the vehicle of the “jazz culture of the U.S.A” (Collins, 1987:181), and cinema orchestra leaders took pride in the quality of the jazz they presented, declaring that it “refuted the claim that ‘only America musicians can play jazz’”(Collins, 1987:117). They recognised the music's
popularity with audiences, even if some orchestra leaders felt it necessary for the sake of their dignity to play their jazz ‘straight’ (Collins, 1987:93). But cinema itself gradually gained prestige for a number of reasons. These included its contribution to the national spirit and economy, ‘trying to do something in Australia for the benefit of all Australians’ (cited Collins, 1987:118), as well as the development from the late 1920s of the more opulent picture palaces which provided an atmosphere of “culture and artistic appreciation” (cited Collins, 1987:117). But one of the most significant forces in the cultural legitimation of the cinema was the advent of talkies, which ultimately converted many previously hostile people to the cinema. Sound made film a genuine rival for the theatre and concert hall, and in so doing, gave movies a new prestige. Almost overnight, editorialists in previously snooty papers began to speak of the fine arts “among which the moving pictures must now be included” (cited Collins, 1987:33).

I wish to argue that this technological development had the same effect on the jazz which was so much a part of the ambience of modernity generated by film. The movie in which this transitional moment was most strikingly dramatised was Australia’s first full-length talkie, Showgirl’s Luck, released in 1931. The film commenced shooting in April 1930, and finished on 1 September of the same year (Dawn4). Showgirl’s Luck is from the outset an aggressive advertisement for a modern Australia, but with its roots in rural tradition. Even though it was directed by an American, Norman Dawn, and starred an Irish actress, Susan Denis, who had reportedly already made four films in Hollywood, a press advertisement proclaims that it stars “Australia’s favourites” and continues, “They didn’t think it could be done! But Australian grit and resourcefulness won over tremendous difficulties” (Dawn). It opens with a fluttering Australian flag filling the screen, and a voice-over trumpeting Australia’s modern technological savvy. This is not only the first “Australian all talking picture”, it is a film about the arrival of the talking picture and much was made of this technology in the publicity. One advertisement linked it with the showgirl image: “Lips and Hips — Microphones and Movies” (Dawn) and the working title for the movie even up until mid-October, six weeks after its completion, was still given in The Bulletin as Talkie Mad (The Bulletin, October 15, 1930, p.33, see Dawn). It includes extensive footage of the sound-on-film technology, including during one of its featured songs, the ironic ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’.

The film opens with what might best be described as a country music number5 performed in a rural tent show in Queensland, although this was shot in Balmain, with the background matted out and replaced by a “second exposure of beautiful mountains and big trees” (Dawn)6. The musical transition in the film is thus from a form of ‘bush ballads’ to contemporary jazz-based songs about new cinema technology, which is the subject of ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’. The heroine and her rival travel from the

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4 The reference ‘Dawn’ is to the document file held on Showgirl’s Luck in NFSA, which includes the typewritten journal on the film kept by its director Norman Dawn, as well as some brief notes by researcher Joan Long.

5 A style of music more commonly referred to as ‘hillbilly’ at the time of the film’s release.

6 Curiously, the visible instrumentation does not correspond with what we hear. I was also surprised at the character of the music, which seemed far more sophisticated in its genre and production quality than I would have expected from an Australian band of that time. I raised this with Australian film historian Graham Shirley, based at NFSA, and he understood that Dawn had in fact used a US recording for this and some other sequences in which there is a similar disjunction between vision and sound. My thanks to Graham for this and other invaluable discussions.
tent show in response to an invitation to star in the production of a sound movie. In relation to the present discussion, there is a further anomaly concerning the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The movie was ready for a trade showing in January 1931, and premiered in December 1931 (Pike and Cooper, 1998:156) but like The Cheaters it also includes an image of the bridge as it would not be until over a year later, and in a scene that is surplus to plot requirements. The point again is that by some extraordinary and expensive post-production labour, the image of the apparently completed bridge was added to the film, emphasising its enormous imaginative power as a visual addition to the plotline about major cultural transitions in the discourse of nation. What the bridge brought to that discourse was the image of technology and secondary industry as a path to the future. And the musical ethos that provides the sonic supplement to these visual images is hinted at in the film’s publicity, which asked, “Can our flappers act? Too right” (Dawn). The incidental music to the positive potential of modernity is jazz.

The current US hit ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’ is the central set-piece number. It consists of a live outdoor rehearsal performance at Lapstone Hill Hotel where most of the film was shot, but the ontological status of what we see and hear on the screen is highly ambiguous. In terms of the diegesis we are watching a rehearsal, but the sequence is interspersed with footage from various other films that complement the lyric — lions, a building on fire, crowds. That is, what the narratology tells us the participants in the film are seeing cannot be the same as what we are seeing, all because of the ‘magic’ of film editing. This deployment of sophisticated film technology is a feature of the movie, which includes a famous sequence in which the heroine, after smoking a cigar, experiences a form of nausea which is visually represented by her eyes moving out of her face. The film is thus very much ‘about’ the sophistication of contemporary cinema technology. The ‘We can’t sleep’ collages also include footage of the sound recordist at work, his eyes glowing with pride, and the equipment strongly foregrounded in the shot. They also include a number of shots of the band accompanying the song, to which I shall return. But the immediate point is that jazz is now positively aligned with an Australia whose future lies in technology and contemporary urban culture.

So too in one more film to be considered here. The Squatter’s Daughter premiered in September 1933 at Sydney’s Civic Theatre to inaugurate an all-Australian-made film policy, and, appropriately, it opens with a nation-building agenda, scrolled up the screen:

THE PRIME MINISTER.

I believe that Cinesound, in producing “The Squatter’s Daughter,” has created a picture that will redound to the credit of Australia wherever it is shown.

The picture breathes the spirit of the country’s great open spaces and the romance, adventure and opportunity in the lives of those who in the past pioneered, and are today building up our great primary industries.
Australia, scenically, is unparalleled — it has the breadth and atmosphere of health, optimism and progress — and I sincerely hope that viewing this picture will create in the minds of its audiences added interest in the Commonwealth and the great future that undoubtedly lies before her.

Joe Lyons

This kind of chauvinist message is reminiscent of the opening of Showgirl’s Luck, and may reflect (and attempt to deflect) the pain of the Great Depression, to restore confidence simultaneously in tradition and modernity, past and future, and the state of Australian cinema. The provenance of the story is instructive in the present context. The title The Squatter’s Daughter was originally that of a play from 1905 by Edmund Duggan and Bert Bailey (of later ‘Dad and Dave’ fame), the success of which led to a movie version The Squatter’s Daughter or Land of the Wattle (William Anderson, 1910. No copy survives, but the plot involved the rivalry between two sheep stations, one of which was managed by young Violet Enderby, and the other by a young man who is being manipulated by his unscrupulous overseer. Consistent with the movie-going appetites of the period, the plot incorporated scenes from the career of the bushranger Ben Hall, including his death, as well as a shearing competition and an aboriginal subplot (Pike and Cooper, 1998:10). The changes evident in the 1933 version underscore the developments I have been tracing here. Apart from one ‘gumleaf band’ number, the aboriginal theme has vanished, likewise the bushranger subplot. The emphasis is now wholly upon the young Enderby girl (now Joan rather than Violet). The plot (which in broad outline would later serve Baz Luhrmann for his recent film Australia (2008) centres not on the heroic labour of men, but on young Joan Enderby. Joan manages her own sheep station in rivalry with Clive Sherrington, the manager of another station, Waratah, on behalf of his supposed father who, as the film opens, is returning from England where he had sought medical treatment for encroaching blindness — treatment which though initially promising, turns out to have failed as the film proceeds. Joan receives assistance from a stranger, Wayne, and following a series of plot developments, we discover that he is the true son of Sherrington Senior, while Clive’s father was a station hand. The marriage of Joan to Wayne thus unites the two stations.

There is much else that is brought together harmoniously. Sherrington Senior and his friend Cartwright, from London, are on board ship as it arrives in Sydney. They survey Sydney Harbour and Sherrington proudly points out the cargo ships, “treasure ships”, that carry Australian wool (“the spirit of our country’s in it”) to the world. Again in the final shot of this sequence, we see a view of the bridge that is not required just by the plotline. Sherrington Senior’s eyesight thus survives long enough for him to link the symbolism of the new Harbour Bridge with a rural tradition, and international modernity with the Bush. There follows a party at Waratah Station. The sequence is surprising, a clear and deliberate rewriting of the rural mythology, and a long way from the tough and gritty stereotypes of the harsh but redemptive bush life. Here, city comforts come to the bush: a swimming pool in a space traditionally seen as tending to aridity, leisure fripperies, and women who are at ease with the menfolk, who in turn negotiate good-humouredly with comparatively immodest modern fashions – and hedonistic clowning around in the pool by a young man with the supreme jazz instrument of the day, the saxophone. Then, indoors, we see jazz-based music transposed to a rural
recreation setting for dancing. The bridge between primary industry and modern internationalisation, which Sherrington described as his ship entered the heads, is being constructed in this party scene.

I finish by returning to the representation of jazz in each of these three movies, to advance a hypothesis about the relationship between the coming of sound to film, and the legitimisation of jazz (and I believe that this will apply internationally to diasporic jazz). In its earliest Australian phase, jazz was regarded as a form of extravagant and rather inelegant dancing. I have seen no surviving film of the 1920s in which that connection is not explicit. Gradually that connection weakens, and by the time Rolf de Heer made the jazz film *Dingo* (Rolf de Heer, 1991) with Miles Davis — largely in an outback setting, be it noted — there is no link between jazz and dancing. This in itself is significant: detaching jazz from dancing shifts it away from effeminacy and also from what was seen as the untrustworthy corporeal to the greater intellectual discipline of instrumental performance. There are many reasons for this shift, but one that has not been explored is the coming of sound to cinema. My interest is in how this might have helped to legitimise jazz. Before the talkies, the way jazz was represented cinematically was too undignified to achieve this legitimisation within the discourses of nation. Furthermore, these representations were sonically extremely heterogeneous. The choice and quality of musical accompaniment for silent movies was extremely varied (Collins, 1987:93). Although synopsis notes with musical suggestions might accompany the film, there was no way of being sure if, and to what extent, they might be observed, especially in non-metropolitan picture houses. For this reason it would have been all the more important that the visual image of the musicians unambiguously conform to assumptions about jazz throughout the silent era.

The arrival of sound both homogenised the sonic cinematic experience of jazz, and shifted the emphasis from zany visual antics to sonority. *Greenhide* includes the earliest surviving cinematic representation of an Australian jazz band, at the garden party held by Margery and her circle of irresponsibly emancipated ‘New Women’ friends. To establish her character she must be shown as a woman who ‘jazzes’. In a silent movie, how does a band display its jazz credentials? The answer is by extravagant visual tomfoolery and even a kind of vulgarity. Thus, the musicians wave their instruments and stand up and down gesturing grotesquely, just as Margery herself dances in an abandoned and even inelegant manner. How else are we to know that this is a jazz band? At one point it even appears that the drummer spits across his kit. The casual spit is also seen later in one of the lead male characters in *Showgirl’s Luck*, and perhaps this is another residue at a transitional point in the representation of popular cultural practices. Although this is a sound film, it is Australia’s first, and the grammar of silent film performance has not yet addressed the new sonic order. Thus, while on the one hand the film flaunts at every opportunity the possibilities of the new sound technology, at the same time its performers are bringing with them the conventions of silent film (and vaudeville) in which they have all been trained. This is particularly apparent in those older actors who had made the transition from the earlier traditions, like Arthur Tauchert who had established his reputation as a silent film actor in such movies as Raymond Longford’s *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1919).
It is also evident in the jazz band that is seen accompanying the rehearsal of ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’. There is little attempt to marry what is seen with what is heard, as for example in the disjunction between the instrument seen to be played and the one heard. The musicians are still performing a music that, hitherto, has not been heard on film, and which has to identify itself visually. And the solution is the same as the jazz musicians in Greenhide: zany actions and waving instruments about so wildly that one fears for their safety, gestures and grimaces that fit the description ‘real gone’ (and it would be an instructive exercise to explore the emergence of this term at a later stage of popular music history). These musicians are literally ‘performing’ jazz, in a way that has yet to come to terms with the advent of sound.

It is a transitional moment between the visual nonsense of Greenhide, and the more visually composed and dignified jazz demeanour of later sound films like The Squatter’s Daughter. In that film, at the party scene described above it is some of the guests who are behaving with abandon. The contrast between the two young men in the pool, one making noises on the saxophone while his friend playfully pushes him under the water, and the musicians playing for dancers inside, cannot but have been intentional, since the one directly segues into the other. We move indoors, to see a band playing jazz for the dancing guests. The ‘bridge’ between primary industry and modern internationalisation, which was described as the ship entered Sydney Harbour, is being constructed in this party scene. In a lengthy shot of the band, the physical demeanour of the musicians is notable. Unlike the clown-like antics of earlier cinematic representations of Australian jazz musicians, they are in dignified dinner suits and play without any extravagant gestures, as would any other group of musicians with a sense of professional gravitas. This is a very modern version of the bush-life: sophisticated recreation and cuisine, as waiters serve hors d’oeuvres, stylish costuming, and an up-to-the-minute jazz-based dance band, with an independent minded young woman announcing that she is about to take charge of her own fortunes in a masculinist environment. While the fashionably modern dance band continues to be heard playing a waltz in the background, the dialogue is about new liberating gender roles, but unlike Margery in Greenhide, this is harnessed to, rather than threatening, the national interest: young Joan Enderby’s sheep drive will contribute to the national economy. Her announcement is followed by a patriotic speech from the station owner Sherrington Senior about the spirit of Australia, still backed by the music of the band throughout:

That’s how we breed ‘em in the bush … The spirit grows to match those skies… [What makes this country] isn’t the land. That fought like the devil before it yielded. Not brute strength of men and women battling with nature. But spirit. Why man, in a hundred years it built a nation.

This is literally nation-building rhetoric, and its musical accompaniment is what was at that time referred to in the east of Australia as a ‘jazz waltz’. It’s a modern dance orchestra that the audience has heard playing jazz as a sign of the voguishness of this version of the bush. This is the bush tradition modernising itself and taking on the trappings of contemporary sophistication, ‘bridging’ rural and urban, exalting rather than excoriating the New Woman.
Conclusion

Sound enabled the sound of jazz to be projected directly. It turned cinema jazz from visual display to sonority. This allowed its semi-comic, undignified clowning to be dispensed with, and the cinematic depiction of the music brought it closer to respectable popular music performance. In musical terms, jazz is gradually being assimilated into the approved mainstream of advancing modernity. In moral and cultural terms it is beginning to come to an accommodation with an Australian identity which itself is increasingly reconciling a bush tradition and the imperatives of modernity. Hitherto the portrayal of jazz in silent film required extravagant visual effects, like prancing musicians and dancers. The advent of the soundtrack enabled film to present music directly, and this almost certainly contributed to the shift in the way jazz is conceptualised, from visuality to sonority, a shift also accelerated by the sudden arrival of electrical amplification in live jazz performance (see further Johnson, 2000:81–105). This seems to be one of the factors that nudged jazz into a more favourable alignment with national identity. Apart from the fact that vernacular dance does not carry the same cultural capital as instrumental skill (dancing appears to be abandoned corporeality, instrumental performance is disciplined and more cerebral), dance is also more feminised – the stereotypical image of the irresponsible ‘jazz age’ is the dancing flapper. Originally conceived as separate from and in opposition to the rural mythology, jazz becomes one end of a ‘bridge’ between the city and the country that holds the promise of self-generated national economic renewal.

In time this process was accelerated of course by other factors. These appear to include disillusionment with the Anglo-American axis of economic and political influence during the 1930s. The arrival of US service personnel from 1941 was ambiguous in its impact, often generating resentment at patronising attitudes. This appears to have been duplicated in the jazz community whose members often felt ‘we could do it as just as well’. A nationalist spirit enters Australian jazz during the Second World War, becoming more aware of its own robustness, as evidenced particularly in the emerging revivalist or traditional jazz movement. Somewhere between the early 1930s and the end of the war there is a transition from opposition to collaboration in the relationship between jazz and established models of Australian identity. The jazz enthusiast crossed a line from being at best an effeminate champagne debauchee, to at worst a masculine beer drinker, and with a greater affinity for the bush mythology. By the late twentieth century, jazz had become so assimilated as one of the most pervasive musics of Australian identity, that it has largely gone un-noted as such. The contrast with the 1920s is radical, and further enquiry will be instructive regarding the evolving Australian self-consciousness and its place in a global context throughout the twentieth century.

References


**Filmography**

- William Anderson (1910) *The Squatter’s Daughter* or *The Land of the Wattle*
- Charles Chauvel (1926) *Moth of Moombi*
- ------ (1926) *Greenhide*
- Norman Dawn (1931) *Showgirl’s Luck*
- Ken Hall (1933) *The Squatter’s Daughter*
- Rolf de Heer (1991) *Dingo*
- Baz Luhrmann (2008) *Australia*
- Raymond Longford (1919) *The Sentimental Bloke*
HARD BOILED MUSIC
The case of L.A. Noire

Iain Hart

Abstract

A lot can change in six decades. L.A. Noire (Rockstar Games, 2011), a video game developed primarily by Sydney development studio Team Bondi, is set in Los Angeles in 1947. The game is ostensibly an interactive film noir, or at least a tribute to the noir aesthetic. But the style signified by the term film noir has developed over time, perhaps as much as the city of Los Angeles itself, and L.A. Noire’s “noire” is noticeably different to the style at its 1940s inception. To a player familiar with classic noir the promise of becoming a modern-day Marlowe is on shaky ground. Comparing L.A. Noire to notable examples from film, television and literature, this article discusses the game’s explicit attempt to be an authentic jeu noir and its musical accompaniment to crime and justice in 1940s Los Angeles. By exploring the origins of the game’s musical aesthetic, this article determines L.A. Noire’s relationship with the noir tradition. Although the game’s strong links to period noir film are unsurprising, L.A. Noire’s nexus of period style and open-form gameplay connects the player to film noir’s earliest influences, allowing exploration of both a constructed history and the notion of ‘noir’ itself. Accordingly, L.A. Noire should be considered as a progression, rather than a derivation, of the noir tradition.

Keywords

Video game, film noir, period, hard-boiled detective fiction, jazz

Introduction: A (nominal) claim to authenticity

Film noir is among the most iconic of film styles. Its shadowed scenes, hardened detectives and femmes fatales have had a widely recognised influence on myriad cinematic and cultural productions through the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Its influence spans both genres and media, with noir traits evident in films, books and art of many kinds. And unsurprisingly, the noir influence is now observable in new media such as video games.

L.A. Noire is a video game developed by Sydney development studio Team Bondi and published by Rockstar Games in 2011. It’s not hard to see that L.A. Noire is trying to be noir—the most obvious clue is, of course, its name. The grammatically incorrect extra “e” in “Noire” is a bit of a mystery—it is reportedly the fault of a programmer’s typo (Plunkett, 2010: online)—but the inclusion of the word in the game’s title tells us a lot about the developer’s intent. We can infer that the noir style was an important objective in the development of this game, possibly even one of the most important. But an academic approach to L.A. Noire is not necessarily so straightforward. Naming a game “Noire” implies an attempt at noir authenticity, but noir authenticity requires more than simply stylistic appropriations. Determining
whether *L.A. Noire* is *noir* requires an analysis of the game’s ancestry, a reckoning of where the game sits on the twisted and complex *noir* family tree.

The task is made easier by the relationship between jazz and *noir*. This relationship is also not straightforward, but it is more extensively documented, and (as shall be shown below) each phase of (classic) *noir* is marked by a particular relationship to jazz. Accordingly, this article will determine *L.A. Noire*’s place in the *noir* tradition by comparing elements of its score to the music of the main periods of film and television *noir*, thus developing a musical ancestry for the game. A brief history of the relationship between *noir* and jazz will explore classic *noir*, television *noir* (*Peter Gunn* [Blake Edwards, 1958–61]), and period *noir* (*L.A. Confidential* [Curtis Hanson, 1997]), against which two examples of music from *L.A. Noire* will be analysed. The article will then conclude by considering *L.A. Noire*’s links to hard-boiled detective fiction, a precursor to *film noir*.

The origins of *noir*

The classic phase of *film noir* is agreed by consensus to span a period of cinema from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), directed by John Huston and based on the novel of the same name by Dashiell Hammett, and *Touch of Evil* (1958) directed by Orson Welles (Silver, 1996: 11). The term *film noir* literally means ‘black cinema’ or ‘dark cinema’, a reference to the dark styles and themes employed therein, and was coined by Nino Frank soon after the reintroduction of American film into French cinemas following the second World War (Borde and Chaumeton, 1955: 17). Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton—authors of *Panorama du Film Noir Americaine* (1955), the first book to be written about *film noir*—defined *film noir* loosely, concluding:

> The moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary *film noir*. All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect: that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed. The aim of *film noir* was to create a specific alienation. (ibid: 25)

Note two things: firstly, Borde and Chaumeton here refer to *film noir* as a cycle rather than a genre (at other points they describe it as a series to the same effect). From the beginning of the phenomenon it was clear that *noir* films could be found in almost any genre; Raymond Durgnat adds that *film noir* classification is a function of “motif and tone” before briefly listing *noir* films from a broad range of genres (Durgnat, 1970: 38). Secondly, Borde and Chaumeton’s definition of *noir* discusses emotion rather than style. To a 21st century viewer the term *film noir* bears mostly stylistic connotations—stark black and white images, silhouettes of venetian blinds in private detectives’ offices, figures in trench coats committing crimes in dark alleys, and sultry saxophone melodies accompanying a gritty narration or a *femme fatale* in a (presumably) red dress. Indeed, it may be surprising to today’s viewers that a classic *film noir* might exhibit few, if any, of these tropes. The history of how a pan-generic and emotionally defined cycle became a stylistic genre in the public consciousness, though interesting, will not be addressed fully here; however, the history of *noir*’s metamorphoses will inform this article’s discussion of *noir* music at various points. More directly useful to a study of the thematic and stylistic origins of the game in question is the history of the relationship between *noir* and jazz.
Jazz and classic film noir

Richard Ness argues that the musical scores of classic films noir worked alongside the other filmic elements to create a “sense of displacement” mirroring American post-Depression, post-War realism (Ness, 2008: 52). He states that “the feeling of uncertainty created by the Depression in the 1930s was contradicted by Hollywood’s reinforcement of images (and sounds) of stability and prosperity,” before explaining that the dissonant elements of noir scores, together with the darkening of style and tone, enable Hollywood to begin reflecting contemporary collective thought (ibid: 55-6). Ness discusses a dissonance in noir scores that might be considered twofold—a musical dissonance according to the generally understood definition, together with increased use of atonality; and a conceptual dissonance, the result of innovative (often sparse) instrumentation and a dramatic reduction in the lengths of scores (and, consequently, an increase in the amount of musical silence). In the terms of Borde and Chaumeton above, the optimism of the late 19th and early 20th century had been replaced in film noir by “alienation”, achieved in part by scores that removed film viewer’s musical “reference points”.

Jazz, meanwhile, was far less commonly used in the non-diegetic music of classic films noir than a modern viewer might expect. Jazz was rarely heard in noir film scores in the 1940s, and though it became more common in the 1950s it was predominantly cast in a negative light. David Butler argues that, “although jazz and the ‘jazz life’ made for a potentially strong noir theme, the conventions of 1940s film noir still prevented jazz from being portrayed positively” (2002: 61). In the 1950s “the respectability being accorded to jazz that encouraged its use in film music was seldom reflected by the films themselves,” wherein jazz “was predominantly used to underscore the film noir or films that involved crime and immorality” (ibid: 95). Butler, Ness (2008), Wierzbicki (2009) and Coady (2012), among others, explore in detail the factors that contributed to the increased use of jazz in the 1950s, and that therefore set the stage for its dramatically increased use in the 1960s. Consequently, the common conception of film noir as a jazz-saturated film style often far surpasses the fact of the matter; indeed, an incredulous Butler points out that even film critics are liable to fall into this error (2002: 154-5).

The jazz association

However, noir and jazz do have an extant association; it is simply that the association was constructed somewhat later than the classic period of film noir. Butler credits Henry Mancini’s scoring of the television series Peter Gunn (Blake Edwards, 1958-61) with both making jazz acceptable to Hollywood and associating jazz with, “the noir world of private detectives, criminals and femmes fatale” (Butler, 2002: 152). Mancini’s use of a light and accessible style of jazz, together with the ensuing popularity of this style and its use in other police/detective shows of that time, led to this style of jazz being retrospectively termed ‘crime jazz’. Butler suggests this association between crime and jazz (in Peter Gunn, and also in other crime and/or action themed films and shows of the 1960s) was an early ingredient in the conceptual link between jazz and the crime-soaked film noir (ibid: 149-51).

The first episode of Peter Gunn provides an illustration of how the jazz/noir association would play out. The opening scene shows the assassination of a crime
boss accompanied by a typical example of crime jazz: a walking bass line and a snare and cymbal dominated percussion rhythm provide a sense of movement, while horn, saxophone and piano melodies provide dramatic emphasis. The title theme has, through its popularity and its subsequent use in other films and television shows (perhaps most notably The Blues Brothers [John Landis, 1980]), outgrown the show itself; it features a similar walking bass, percussion and melody construction to the opening scene. In the funeral scene following, a sensuous melody on saxophones, echoed by a twangy electric guitar, accompanies the protagonist/narrator’s eulogy of the dead crime lord. The music depicts the intertwined romance and alienation of the crime-centred diegetic world, over which the narrator sits all seeing (the viewer learns that the narrator is Peter Gunn himself, played by Craig Stevens). The following scene in Mother’s nightclub shows diegetic uses of jazz, but casts these in a positive light through the positive relationship between the setting and the protagonist. Initially, the band plays a groovy tune accompanying Peter Gunn’s conversation with Mother, with whom he appears friendly. Then, accompanied by a jazz number featuring a ‘jungle’ rhythm, the singer (Edie Hart, played by Lola Albright) sings her sensual song to the room (though her gaze suggests she is singing primarily to Peter Gunn).

The music of Peter Gunn was modern and innovative at the time of first screening. Butler discusses Mancini’s innovations in scoring the show, including instrumentation employing a relatively small (in relation to a film orchestra) jazz band, but most significantly that the show featured an original score at all (Butler, 2002: 148-9). Having been hired to compose original music for the show, it is unsurprising that Mancini should create music in an archly contemporary style, Not only did Mancini believe contemporary music the most apt for the task (ibid: 143), but the Hollywood film scoring tradition was familiar with the incorporation of the modern into the ‘classical’. As Wierzbicki summarises:

Since the start of the nickelodeon period film music had “played” not just to the narrative needs of the on-screen picture but also to the aesthetic needs, and expectations, of its audiences…. Exceptions notwithstanding, thanks to Hollywood’s overwhelming screen dominance even the least educated persons in the smallest cities throughout the world came to regard “Hollywood music” as the norm. This norm readily incorporated modernist devices, especially in films whose plots involved science-fiction and psychological deviance, yet its expressive essence remained firmly rooted in the symphonic and operatic literature of the late nineteenth century. Instead of seeming old-fashioned, however, “Hollywood music” for most moviegoers in the 1940s and ‘50s was very much music of the times. (Wierzbicki, 2009: 195-6)

The new medium of television provided a chance for a film music composer like Mancini, who was already favourably disposed towards the contemporary, to put aside the ‘classical’ and concern himself only with the modern.

By the 1970s, however, the world of classic noir had been relegated to the past. Notably, the noir tradition itself began to diverge at this time. It is possible to distinguish between a collection of neo-noir films and television shows that invoked the noir sensibility outside the classic setting (in diverse ranges of genres, time periods and themes), and a concurrently produced collection of period noir films

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and television shows that sought to recreate classic noir in sensibility, setting and story. The former may include such films as Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976), Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) and Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1993), together with television shows like Miami Vice (Anthony Yerkovich, 1984-89); the latter includes both period remakes of classic noir stories like Farewell, My Lovely (Dick Richards, 1975) and Detour (Wade Williams, 1992), and original period pieces like Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1975) and L.A. Confidential (Curtis Hanson, 1997). While these categories are necessarily broad, and examples exist that span both categories (for instance, The Big Sleep [Michael Winner, 1978]), they illustrate the existence of two distinct sub-traditions of noir. Todd Erickson refers to a “transitional/nostalgic period” of “period noir” remakes in the late 1960s and 1970s, concurrently with which modern noir films were starting to emerge (1996: 311-12). However, as Erickson’s own further analysis alludes to—listing noir remakes through the 1980s and 1990s, and foreseeing future noir remakes (ibid: 324)—and as examples from both sub-traditions have been made in recent times (for example, Sin City [Frank Miller et al., 2005] and No Country for Old Men [Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2007]; L.A. Confidential and Gangster Squad [Ruben Fleischer, 2013]), “period noir” resists classification as a “transitional” phase in the evolution of noir. A comprehensive treatment of the evolution of noir should treat period noir and neo-noir as separate (though of course related), both derived from classic noir but in different ways and with different ends. A full treatment of this divergence is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be noted that the translation of both period noir and neo-noir into the video game medium indicates that creators of non-filmic media regard period noir and neo-noir as distinct sources of filmic inspiration.

In period noir, both noir and its crime jazz accompaniment are nostalgic recreations of the 1940s and 1950s. At first, as in Chinatown, the time of the noir cycle was a recent memory recalled with a slight tinge of nostalgia. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, memory and the nostalgia were thoroughly mixed. Butler states that “jazz may have become associated with film noir simply by being contemporaneous” (2002: 155); he then uses Michel Chion’s term “retrospective illusion” to explain the mechanism of the association’s construction (ibid: 156 ff). Over time, memories of noir and of contemporaneous jazz have become blended in the public consciousness, so much so that even “contemporary filmmakers and critics of film noir have often assumed that jazz was indeed the actual soundtrack to classic noir” (ibid: 155). Butler further explains that the association is bilateral, and that “the retrospective use of jazz has become one of the main purposes for the music being employed in contemporary films... to create the feeling of the past” (ibid: 166). The retrospective illusion of film noir imbues the style with ever-present jazz soundtracks. Thus, just as jazz is expected in classic noir, jazz is employed in period noir.

Period noir and the memory of crime jazz

L.A. Confidential (1997) is a period noir film directed by Curtis Hanson, adapted from the novel of the same name by James Ellroy (1990). It is set in 1953 in Los Angeles, and follows the activities and investigations of three police detectives investigating a string of murders. The film exhibits noiric influences in its period setting, style and narrative, and its three main characters exhibit tropes derived

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8 Examples of video game period noir include L.A. Noire and Face Noir (Mad Orange, 2013); examples of video game neo-noir include Grim Fandango (LucasArts, 1998), the Max Payne series (Remedy Entertainment, 2001-03; Rockstar Studios, 2012) and The Wolf Among Us (Telltale Games, 2013). Neither list is exhaustive.
from the (anti)heroes of noir. In her comparative study of *L.A. Confidential* and Carl Franklin’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), Elana Shefrin notes that both Hanson and Franklin “dedicated prodigious amounts of time and energy toward visually, aurally, and kinesthetically reconstructing their personal versions of an authentic production locale [and] focused more on recapturing rather than on re-imagining the sights and sounds of that era,” although she believes neither would claim to have made an entirely authentic recreation (Shefrin, 2005: 173). Shefrin is informed by an interview between Hanson and Amy Taubin, in which Hanson describes at some length his efforts to construct a film that used period elements but told its story in a modern way. Hanson states:

> my number one directive... was ‘Let’s create this world of L.A. Confidential, and let’s give great attention to the detail of the period, but then let’s put it all in the background and let’s shoot it as if it were a contemporary movie. So that the audience forgets that they’re watching a period movie and what they’re aware of are the characters and the emotions.’ The one thing that I wanted to avoid was telling the story through the lens of nostalgia. Because one of the reasons for making a picture set in Los Angeles in 1953 is that so many of the things that were starting in that era of economic boom and postwar optimism are still very much with us today, for better or worse. (Taubin, 1997: online)

Of the film’s relationship to the *noir* tradition, Hanson says in the same interview:

> it’s multi-character, the characters are ambiguous at best, it’s period and it’s related to film noir, the very reasons why I wanted to make it. I didn’t look on it as a homage to the world of Raymond Chandler, or to The Big Sleep, Chinatown - movies I love, but didn’t want to do. I wanted this to be a movie set in the forwardlooking, splashy 50s. That’s why it’s L.A. Confidential - Confidential Magazine, lurid and fun. Funny even, yet dark. It’s noir in the broadest sense, meaning the darkness under the bright. (ibid: online)

Ostensibly, Hanson was attempting to create a period film that was “related to film noir,” rather than a period noir *per se*.

And yet, *L.A. Confidential* is regarded as a *noir* film (Ebert, 2008: online) and presented as a historically sensitive film alongside other neo-*noir* films (Arthur, 1998: 41-42), indicating that the film may have ended up more *noir* than Hanson intended. Its modern storytelling nevertheless tells a period story, with noiric themes and the incorporation of numerous historical details and characters (attributable, in large part, to Ellroy’s novel from which the story is derived). Paul Arthur suggests that the film draws from the *noir* tradition with more integrity than other films of its time, pointing out that the film “is dead serious about its historical backdrop, its relation to the generic lineage of *noir* storytelling but also to the social-political climate in which the [*noir*] series flourished and expired” (Arthur, 1998: 41). Additionally, the hybrid myths in the film both conform to, and contribute to, the retrospective illusion of *film noir*. Shefrin uses the term “hybrid myth” to describe a perspective-biased use of history or tradition in order to tell a fictional story, particularly referring to an element or a group of elements within the story (Shefrin, 2005: 172). Her study of *L.A. Confidential* demonstrates the hybrid myths in the characters and the setting of the film and suggests that its selective use of *noir* contributes to these. A relationship may be traced between the ‘hybrid myth’ and the ‘retrospective illusion’: the former is similar in effect to the latter but is
created intentionally, while the latter undoubtedly shapes both the creation and reception of the former. *L.A. Confidential* has been received as a *film noir* both modern and period and shows modern/period hybridisations in myriad elements, from its visual style to its story to its soundtrack.

*L.A. Confidential* features both contemporary 1950s popular music and a jazz-infused original score by Jerry Goldsmith. Reviewers Todd McCarthy (1997: online), John Wrathall (1997: 45-6) and Peter Travers (1997: 59) likened Goldsmith’s score for *L.A. Confidential* to his score for *Chinatown*. As a veteran Hollywood composer and Los Angeles native, Goldsmith would have been familiar with both modern *noir* and the historic L.A. to which Hanson aspired. The score makes frequent use of solitary trumpet melodies that hint at a *noiric* alienation (which, although diluted relative to classic *noir* alienation, has myriad loci in the film). These trumpet parts are set over dark orchestral and piano accompaniments, which are responsible for inducing dramatic tension. The piano, in particular, frequently plays loud single-note staccato melodies synchronised with timpani and snare drums, imbuing both tension and an air of military precision reminiscent of the post-war Los Angeles police force ethos. The score employs both jazz elements and orchestral elements, constructing a hybrid myth of the scoring of *noir* by invoking both retrospective illusions of jazz and the conventional sound of what Wierzbicki above termed “Hollywood music.” Used in a period setting, and in conjunction with contemporary 1950s popular music, the score actively draws upon retrospective illusions of both the 1950s and the *film noir* style, while its modern and conventional aspects allow it to appeal to its 1990s audience without interpretation. As such, it reinforces the retrospective illusion that *film noir* was a jazz-infused filmic style. It serves to a viewer what they would expect from a period *film noir*, yet remains a familiar viewing experience.

On the case of *L.A Noire*

The quest for the ‘familiar’ is presumably one of the primary motivations for implementing filmic qualities in a video game. Computer programs (of which video games are a subset) have no intrinsically filmic qualities—they are, at the base level, binary-encoded sets of mathematical instructions that allow electronic machines to be used as human-operated tools. Thus, any filmic elements in a video game (and, for that matter, any aesthetic elements in any computer program) are ultimately deliberate, creative inclusions. That is not to say that the implementation is made without utilitarian considerations; the use of filmic elements in a video game may create a familiar atmosphere for viewers of films, thereby helping to breaking down technological or psychological barriers that would otherwise prevent their use of computer programs.

With this in mind, the developers of *L.A. Noire* could be considered to have hit ‘a hole in one’, as the game is liable to give an *L.A. Confidential* viewer a heady sense of *déjà vu*. The two texts are remarkably similar throughout—in style, in setting, in music, and to some extent in narrative and character development. The (uncommonly linear) narrative follows the career trajectory of a straight-laced policeman named Cole Phelps as he progresses from beat cop to detective and through various detective bureaus. The protagonist gradually becomes more jaded over the game’s progression, though he could never be described as hard-boiled. The game’s arching narrative centres on an army-surplus morphine racket run by some of Phelps’ former Marine comrades. Phelps falls for a dame, is betrayed by his partner and demoted, but he maintains a private investigation of the racket, only to
be forced underground. The player’s own investigation of the racket continues through another of Phelps’ Marine comrades—an investigator named Jack Kelso, who sets aside his differences with Phelps and turns private in order to help investigate the case, and who exhibits a more hard-boiled personality than Phelps. The personality types and the themes of redemption explored in the duo of Phelps and Kelso appear similar to the depiction of the trio of Exley, White and Vincennes in *L.A. Confidential*. Phelps, in particular, appears to be a hybrid myth of the *film noir* protagonist, undergoing an incomplete progression from socially conservative to hard-boiled and morally fluid, before being finally and irrevocably redeemed (with his redemption serving as a vindication of his initial social conservatism).

Similar hybrid myths may be found in the game’s portrayal of Los Angeles itself. The visual elements of video games are often a significant hurdle to game developers aiming for filmic realism, as the realism of computer-generated imagery is limited technologically. While technological progression is allowing increasingly realistic video game graphics (indeed, the quest for visual realism in video games is a significant driving force behind computer graphics innovation), there is more to realism than visual authenticity. For instance, the developers of *L.A. Noire* have made up for the technological limitations on the visual realism of their depiction of Los Angeles by making their depiction exceptionally comprehensive. A comment from an official Rockstar Games account named “R* Y” on a Rockstar Games online press release indicates that the game world spans eight square miles⁹. Brendan McNamara, founder of Team Bondi, indicated that “the first year and a half... was just research” into 1940s Los Angeles, involving “newspaper research, guys going over to LA and doing research on the buildings, taking photos, getting all the resources together” to ensure that the depiction was as comprehensive a period replication of Los Angeles as possible (Hurley, 2012: online). Although the game’s linear gameplay prevents it from being classed as a ‘sandbox’ game (Kauz, 2011: online), the player is afforded a large degree of freedom of navigation (that may be surrendered to the character’s partner, if impatient); the player experiences, by consequence, realism in the form of architectural, geographical, automotive and fashion authenticity, and the period representation as a hybrid myth of authenticities and verisimilarities. Additionally, if the player chooses to engage the game’s optional black-and-white graphics mode, chromatic authenticity can be traded for an additional *noiric* verisimilitude that the player may believe gives a ‘more authentic’ *noir* experience.

*L.A. Noire*’s music both accompanies and fortifies the hybrid myths presented in the game’s visual and narrative elements. It is both the product of the retroseason illusion of traditional *noir* scores and uncannily familiar to an *L.A. Confidential* viewer. The game’s score was composed by Andrew Hale, keyboardist of the band Sade, together with his brother Simon Hale, and was recorded at Abbey Road Studios (Smyth, 2011: online). After an introductory melodic section on piano, vibraphone and strings, the title theme features a solitary trumpet melody underset by piano, strings, pizzicato double bass and brushed percussion, with a saxophone providing occasional harmonies. It then develops through four improvisational solos—one each on vibraphone, saxophone, trumpet and piano—before recapitulating the initial solitary trumpet section. The title theme accompanies a looped black-and-white animation¹⁰ of Cole Phelps searching for clues in a dark,
rain-drenched alley. Phelps himself is situated at a distance from the player’s point of view and just in front of his car, while the car’s headlights cast Cole’s long silhouette down the alley and against the wall (his larger-than-life shadow at times overlapping the game’s main menu, which itself is designed to appear as shadows on the wall). Notably, the 9 minutes 30 seconds duration of the theme eclipses the length of the looped animation (several iterations of which may be viewed while listening to the complete theme) – which is the length of time an average player may arguably be expected to interact with a video game’s main menu - and the length of the version of the theme found on the Official Soundtrack record (of 3 minutes 5 seconds duration)\textsuperscript{11}. This suggests the importance of this theme in cementing the noiric aspirations of the game in the player’s consciousness. Although the title animation in itself provides evidence that the game derives inspiration from noir, some game elements may cast doubts upon the game’s apparent (and nominal) claim to noir authenticity (such as the exceedingly straight-laced Cole Phelps character the player must initially control). The more the player encounters the jazz title theme in association with its archly noir visual setting, the more the player’s retrospective illusions of jazz-soaked noir reinforce L.A. Noire’s claim to authenticity. The lengthy and increasingly elaborate title theme may serve as an enticement for the player to linger, increasing the effectiveness of the reinforcement.

It is perhaps apt that a noir-aspiring game should have a notable title theme, but the music accompanying gameplay demonstrates yet more of the game’s filmic influences. The gameplay score employs jazz elements similar to those in the title theme combined with orchestration and arrangement that invoke a ‘Hollywood music’ aesthetic, similar to the score of \textit{L.A. Confidential} as discussed above. A number of melodic figures are prominently developed throughout the score, two of which shall be examined in detail here. The first, a melody derived from the principal trumpet melody of the title theme, shall be referred to as ‘melody A’ henceforth; the second melody shall be referred to as ‘melody B’. Melody A steps from the tonic to a minor third, before a minor sixth appoggiatura is resolved to the fifth. A repeat of the figure then resolves the minor sixth appoggiatura up to a minor seventh. Melody B steps from the fifth up to the second, followed by a run from a major seventh through the tonic to the same second; this figure is then modulated up a fourth. Melody A voices a noiric alienation through the echoed memory of the solitary trumpet melody of the main theme, an ambiguous tonality, and the downward resolution of the minor sixth (with this effect still achieved on the second resolution by memory of the first). Melody B increases dramatic tension through an upward melodic shape, the upward modulation and a major seventh set in a minor tonality. Tracks based on melody A are used in the beginning stages of investigations, while tracks based on melody B are used during stages of heightening dramatic intensity. These melodies are developed throughout the score, and as such they help bind together the musical experience of the game. But two particular settings of these melodies bind the musical experience of the game to the musical experience of earlier noir films.

The first is a setting of melody A in a track named ‘New Beginning, Pt. 1’ on the Official Soundtrack.\textsuperscript{12} In game, this track may accompany the player’s driving navigation early in an investigation. Preceding the implementation of melody A,
‘New Beginning, Pt. 1’ begins with a chord played on horns that repeats at a gradually increasing pace and volume. At the climax of the rhythmic acceleration, the horns are joined by a rolling snare drum before resolving to a higher chord, followed by a deep bowed-bass ostinato. This figure is repeated beneath melody A when it begins to be played on high strings, and is sometimes interjected by militaristic hits on snare drums between repeats. This track, and particularly its accelerating-climaxing rhythm, is reminiscent of the introductory scenes of Taxi Driver, wherein Travis Bickle’s isolation is made explicit (Butler, 2002: 157-9). The militaristic use of snare drums also echoes similar snare drum use in L.A. Confidential, where it was used to invoke the post-war police ethos (a theme which also runs through L.A. Noire).

During a case within the game called “The Naked City”—a downloadable content (DLC) case which is based on its namesake film (Jules Dassin, 1948) (R*Q, 2011: online) - I observed ‘New Beginning, Pt. 1’ played during the initial drive of the investigation. The player character (Cole Phelps) had just been briefed on the case, the murder of a young fashion model. The drive takes place directly following the briefing, its destination being the crime scene. During the drive, Phelps and his partner (a crooked cop named Roy Earle) discuss the case; Earle is annoyed to be assigned to the murder of “some hump”, while Phelps considers the case worthwhile because the victim is “someone’s little girl,” her humanity all the motivation he needs. This investigation, like all in L.A. Noire, begins in daylight at a police station. In this context, ‘New Beginning, Pt. 1’ signifies the police ethos forming the subtext to Phelps’ recent briefing, and may reinforce a noir sensibility weakened by driving through the city during a sunny Californian day (which, whether in full colour or black-and-white, can hardly be described as ‘dark’). The lonely melody may also signify the character’s alienation as a morally upright crime fighter in a crime-darkened world, playing on the tensions between the moralistic Phelps, his crooked partner, and the crime he is travelling to investigate. The use of strings for this melody, however, creates an aesthetic that is more filmic than specifically noiric; the music evokes, rather than invokes, noir.

The second is a setting of melody B in a track named ‘Redemption, Pt. 2’ on the Official Soundtrack. In game, this track may accompany the player’s driving navigation during a plot-thickening point in the narrative. Preceding the implementation of melody B, ‘Redemption, Pt. 2’ begins with a series of jarring, syncopated staccato chords played on strings. The main chords are open augmented seventh chords; these are played sparsely, or clustered with an open octave and an open ninth to give the impression of a melodic three-note run in the top note between the seventh and the second or back again. The chords are accompanied by occasional raps on a hand-played drum. After eight bars the chords are repeated with the addition of the twelfth, which takes a prominent role above the original chord. After a further eight bars, melody B begins to be played on horns, below which the staccato chords continue. In a second and louder iteration, melody B is also played one octave higher on bright trumpets. Low horns forcefully ground this iteration on the tonic (and the fourth during the modulations). More aggressive strings initially continue the staccato figures (albeit with rhythm-evening additional notes in the low strings) but then fall in step with the trumpet and horn melody. The strings then develop into a rising, legato series of long notes before the track concludes with a dramatic avoidance of the tonic. ‘Redemption, Pt. 2’ develops considerably in volume, complexity and instrumentation over its duration, each section larger and louder than the last, but finishes unresolved. In contrast to ‘New

13 Quotes taken from in-game dialogue.
Beginning, Pt. 1’, this track is more overtly filmic and less jazz-infused, though it does feature some rhythmic syncopation, a hand-played drum and perhaps a jazz-inspired trumpet timbre. It is invocative of “Hollywood music” with a slight twist of jazz, in which it may be positively compared to Goldsmith’s score for L.A. Confidential as discussed above.

At a later point in the investigation mentioned above, I observed ‘Redemption, Pt. 2’ played during a sunset drive between an interrogation of a suspect’s fiancée and the suspect’s apartment. Phelps had just learned that the suspect’s fiancée was in possession of stolen jewellery, a gift from the suspect, and that the fiancée’s mother had herself been the victim of theft. The purpose of driving to the suspect’s apartment was to interrogate him about the thefts and about the murder at the centre of the case before he skips town. It is natural that the music played should then avoid resolution: the driving does not in itself provide the information needed to move the narrative forward substantially. However, the music plays to the drama of the situation, and in doing so may modify the player’s reading of the currently setting sun from ‘pretty’ to ‘ominous’. It may also help draw the player’s attention away from the visual world and towards the narrative. A more conventional use of the “Hollywood music” sound, a sound familiar to the film viewing public, renders the music more easily interpreted and thus, arguably, more quickly effective in this action scene.

These examples illustrate certain aesthetic and functional similarities between the music of L.A. Noire and the period noir film L.A. Confidential, in the context of the more general observation that L.A. Noire's music tends to invoke certain “Hollywood music” tropes in order to evoke noir. It would be straightforward, at this point, to categorise L.A. Noire as a text influenced by the period noir tradition; one could even go a little further and say that L.A. Noire exhibits certain traits of a period noir text itself. Its links to the broader noir tradition appear, at this point, to be mostly second-hand, derived from period noir and its evolution. However, a deeper relationship with noir does exist, and is discoverable by comparing L.A. Noire with one of film noir’s literary progenitors: hard-boiled detective fiction.

More than one road to authenticity

There are a vast number of films noir that are adaptations of hard-boiled detective fiction stories, and undoubtedly more that draw on the genre for inspiration. Two of the five films listed by Borde and Chaumeton as inspiring the first investigations of film noir were based on works of hard-boiled detective fiction, and of a third, the screenplay was co-written by hard-boiled novelist Raymond Chandler (Borde and Chaumeton, 1955: 17). Borde and Chaumeton go on to describe as “not haphazardly” the noir screenwriter's predilection for the private detective, a character already “midway between lawful society and the underworld” (ibid: 21). A worthwhile question to ask is whether, as a noir-inspired text, L.A. Noire also exhibits the traits of a hard-boiled detective fiction ancestry. Furthermore, if so, whether these traits arrive in L.A. Noire through the conduit of the game’s period noir influences, or whether more direct comparisons may be drawn.

A comparison between video games and literature is not necessarily a straightforward endeavour. Short of the full treatment perhaps required of this subject, it is possible to draw enough evidence to proceed with this comparison from a recent pedagogical research study. Richard Burger and Julian McDougall (2013) studied groups of students together with their teachers as they taught and
analysed *L.A. Noire* in the context of literature classes at senior high school and undergraduate levels. The study aimed to investigate the concept of ‘literacy’ in video games and what it means to ‘read’ these texts (Berger and McDougall, 2013: 142); it observed “the limitations of subject English in the ‘semi-permeable’ spaces between its teachers and students,” noting that the expertise of both the teachers (in analysing literary texts) and the students (in playing and understanding video games) was required in order to critically analyse the gameplay text (ibid: 148-9). Of particular note for the purposes of this article, the study found that “some students do not see marked boundaries between novels and games (with cinema often acting as a mediator between the two)” (ibid: 145) and that “for the students at least... *L.A. Noire* does function as a (digitally transformed) novel, in relation to other texts, across a flattened hierarchy” (ibid: 148). That is, although the teachers studied appeared to establish a clear separation between textual media before conducting critical comparisons, the students required no such division:

*It is clear that student responses to questions about the ‘status’ of *L. A. Noire* as a novel were more consensual than their teachers — moving away from the simple affirmative to a shared dismantling of the premise of the question.... The students who took part in our study seemed to be comfortable with this ‘flattened’ hierarchy between the novel, cinema and games. However, some of their teachers were more reluctant,retreating to and rehearsing value-laden discourses of fidelity and verisimilitude. (ibid: 148)*

Berger and McDougall chose *L.A. Noire* for their study on account of its appropriations of noir, which in turn was influenced by hard-boiled detective fiction (ibid: 142). Among video games, this is perhaps one of the more ostensible links between a game and a body of literature. However, Berger and McDougall do state that their study is predicated on:

*the premise that cinema contains the utterance of literature, in much the same way as the modern novel now clearly contains the utterance of cinema. Therefore, *L.A. Noire* must frame both these utterances, and in time, both literature and cinema will frame the utterance of the videogame.* (ibid: 145)

To find a link between a video game and a body of literature, therefore, does not explicitly require the mediation of cinema (although this may frequently occur); that the two media exist in the same cultural milieu is justification enough to search for a link. Student responses in the Berger and McDougall study suggest that an expertise in video gameplay tends to inculcate such a “flattened hierarchy” approach; furthermore, some of the initial journalistic responses to *L.A. Noire* observed that the game exhibited certain novelic traits distinguishable from its obvious noiric ambitions (e.g. Kyllo, 2011: online). Thus, although the relationship between video games and literature remains a potential avenue for future study, it is clear that there is a present, functional understanding that *L.A. Noire* may be read, in some manner at least, as literature.

What this means for the current study of *L.A. Noire*’s music may, at this point, be rather obfuscate. I would argue, however, that in light of the ability to read a video game as a literary text, the musicality of the act of gameplay—specifically, its rhythm—becomes comparable with that of hard-boiled detective fiction. Kirk Hamilton writes that “rhythm is an ephemeral yet vital quality in a game, and without it, even the most ambitious and beautifully drawn ideas fall flat” (Hamilton,
2011: online). Hamilton’s theory is that the best video games exhibit a “rhythm of play” that synchronises the game’s elements and the player’s actions, what he calls “a kinesthetic dance of feedback and response.” Elsewhere, Hamilton likens story and gameplay to music and lyrics, explaining that the most powerful gameplay experiences happen “when gameplay and story work in harmony” (Hamilton, 2012: online). In other words, a player will be most drawn into a video game when the rhythm of gameplay and the rhythm of narrative are synchronised—that is, when the actions performed by the player have appropriately proportioned aesthetic and narrative-progressing effects, and conversely, when aesthetic changes and narrative progressions have proportionate effects on the player’s actions. Tia DeNora’s (2000) discussion of “musical entrainment” frames this concept within a discussion about “human-music interaction”; more broadly, DeNora states that “Entrainment may involve regularizing and/or modifying physiological states, behaviour, the temporal parameters of mood and feeling, and social role and action style,” and that music, along with “other temporally organized environmental media,” may “afford or provide resources for particular kinds of bodies and bodily states, states that are regularized and reproduced over time” (DeNora, 2000: 79). Hamilton’s “rhythm of play” may be considered an “entrainment” that affords the player certain bodily states (actions and reactions) that align productively with the visual, aural and narrative elements of the game. This entrainment is in two ways musical: firstly, the video game’s score plays a part in the game’s overall entrainment; secondly, the entrainment results in the player engaging in a rhythmic experience, taking part in the aforementioned “kinesthetic dance” upon which hinges the interactive, narrative and emotive efficacy of the text. This may be demonstrated through comparisons of the settings of melodies A and B above with text excerpts from the novels The Thin Man (1934) by Dashiell Hammett and Farewell, My Lovely (1940) by Raymond Chandler respectively.

Consider first this excerpt from The Thin Man by Dashiell Hammett:

‘Her old man’s crazy: she thinks she is.’
‘How do you know?’
“You asked me. I’m telling you.”
“You mean you’re guessing?”
‘I mean that’s what’s wrong with her; I don’t know whether Wynant’s actually nuts and I don’t know whether she inherited any of it if he is, but she thinks both answers are yes, and it’s got her doing figure eights.’
When we stopped in front of the Courtland she said: ‘That’s horrible, Nick. Somebody ought to—’
I said I didn’t know: maybe Dorothy was right. ‘Likely as not she’s making doll clothes for Asta right now.’ (Hammett, [1934] 2013: 44-45)

In this text, former private detective Nick Charles and his wife Nora are riding in a taxi through New York. Very little information is given about the setting of the scene, other than the novel’s New York setting, the fact that the conversation takes place in a taxi (explicitly mentioned at the start of the chapter), that the ride lasts at least a few blocks, and that they stop at a building called the Courtland. The focus of the text is the conversation between Nick and Nora. As Carl Malmgren illustrates, hard-boiled detective fiction presents a “decentered world” stripped of values (Malmgren, 1997: 123); in this world, the detective and his actions are of more interest than the world itself (ibid: 126). Raymond Chandler writes that the detective story should be about “an effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual elucidation of character” (Chandler, [1950]: online). Now, recall the setting of melody A in the track ‘New Beginning, Pt. 1’ in L.A. Noire. During this
drive, the player’s character (Phelps) discusses the case with his partner (Earle) immediately following their initial briefing. This discussion does not, in itself, move the narrative forward, but instead reveals what the two characters ‘think’ of aspects of the narrative. This may be situated within a longer term “gradual elucidation of character” in which the player observes the moralistic Phelps’ fall from grace and eventual redemption, and Earle’s complicity in corruption and role in Phelps’ undoing. Thus, the player must listen to this dialogue in order to understand the nuances of the narrative, and so to play the game well. ‘New Beginning, Pt. 1’ is accordingly low-key and relatively subdued. It avoids taking focus from the dialogue, allowing the dialogue primacy in affecting the entrainment of the player. The music can, however, alter the player’s reception of the dialogue; among other possible effects, the noiric alienation signified in melody A may lead the player to more deeply associate with Phelps, who in this discussion appears to be a lonely champion for the dead victim. The overall effect is that the player is entrained to investigate the case, to play the part of the detective and the truth-seeker, to focus (in this instance) not on the elaborate recreation of Los Angeles surrounding the characters but on the character’s location in the narrative trajectory, and to perform the actions required for the narrative to progress.

To examine the rhythm of play in the above setting of melody B, consider the following excerpt from Farewell, My Lovely by Raymond Chandler:

We went west, dropped over to Sunset and slid fast and noiseless along that. The Indian sat motionless beside the chauffeur. An occasional whiff of his personality drifted back to me. The driver looked as if he was half asleep but he passed the fast boys in the convertible sedans as though they were being towed. They turned on all the green lights for him. Some drivers are like that. He never missed one.

We curved through the bright mile or two of the Strip, past the antique shops with famous screen names on them, past the windows full of point lace and ancient pewter, past the gleaming new night clubs with famous chefs and equally famous gambling rooms, run by polished graduates of the Purple Gang, past the Georgian-Colonial vogue, now old hat, past the handsome modernistic buildings in which the Hollywood flesh-peddlers never stop talking money, past a drive in lunch which somehow didn’t belong, even though the girls wore white silk blouses and drum majorettes’ shakos and nothing below the hips but glazed kid Hessian boots. Past all this and down a wide smooth curve to the bridle path of Beverly Hills and lights to the south, all colours of the spectrum and crystal clear in an evening without fog, past the shadowed mansions up on the hills to the north, past Beverly Hills altogether and up into the twisting foothill boulevard and the sudden cool dusk and the drift of wind from the sea. (Chandler, [1940] 2009: 149-50)

This text focuses more prominently on the detective Philip Marlowe’s actions than on his character. In this instance, as he is being driven along in silence and without the power to act, Marlowe relates his observations of the world passing by. The descriptions come thick and fast, a series of brief snapshots of Los Angeles. Aside from a few musings, Marlowe’s descriptions never move out of the immediate present, and the reader’s attention is entrained to follow Marlowe’s. Compare this with the setting of melody B described above in the track ‘Redemption, Pt. 2’ in L.A. Noire. Having left the house of the suspect’s fiancée, the player is here intended by the narrative to get quickly to the suspect’s apartment in order to interrogate him.
before he skips town. The game here seeks to entrain the player into a sense of haste. The sunset evident during the drive is a visual signification that the case is in its latter stages, but for much of the drive this is the only signifier of the narrative. After a brief initial continuation of the dialogue that had taken place at the fiancée’s house, the majority of the drive progresses without discussion. This allows the player to concentrate on driving, with focus brought into the immediate present. ‘Redemption, Pt. 2’ is thus able to take a primary role in affecting the player’s entrainment. The track’s jarring staccato elements may entrain the player into more ‘staccato’ modes of action, perhaps rendered as a more reckless or speed-focussed driving style. Meanwhile, the track’s penchant for the unresolved and its rise in volume and substance over time may, as mentioned previously, be read as an ‘ominous’ sign, and thus increase narrative drama. The player is entrained to drive quickly, because the case depends on it. Although entrainment with the overall trajectory of the game’s narrative is maintained, the entrainment of the player’s actions in the immediate present is the primary concern in this scene for the game and its music.

These examples illustrate that it is possible to compare certain aspects of L.A Noire directly with hard-boiled detective fiction, a precursor to film noir. More specifically, the entrainment of the player of L.A. Noire mirrors the entrainment of the reader of detective fiction. The rhythm of the player’s engagement with the game—which music influences both generally and directly—enables a deeper involvement with the fictional characters and actions, in a manner aesthetically and functionally similar to the hard-boiled writer’s prose.

Conclusion

L.A. Noire exhibits, in its music as in other elements, clear links to the period noir tradition. Its music is informed by the long relationship between film noir and jazz, and the more recently formed fusion of jazz and “Hollywood music” found in recent period noirs. But to classify L.A. Noire as a period noir game risks prioritising the aesthetic qualities of the game too heavily, which is unacceptable when analysing any interactive text. The analysis of the gameplay and accompanying music of L.A. Noire in this article shows that the game’s links to the noir tradition are more than superficial. A period noir film uses hybrid myths to employ retrospective illusions of classic noir, and in doing so reflexively constructs these illusions. L.A. Noire does this too, but it entrains the player in the process such that the gameplay experience is more akin to the activities of the hard-boiled narrator than to the viewing of a film. The player does not simply watch cases be solved, but is caught up in the investigation. The player does not simply listen to L.A. Noire’s score, but is entrained by it and, to some degree, enacts it along with the role of the detective. On this basis, L.A. Noire can be considered a noir text in its own right, a progression of the noir tradition rather than a derivation or digital adaptation of period noir. It was mentioned above that both period noir and neo-noir have been translated into the video game medium. Together with this article’s investigation of L.A. Noire, this suggests the existence of jeu noir, a video game-based tradition of noir that is related to, but not strictly derivative of, filmic traditions of noir. And as the narrative power and efficacy of video games increase, further study of nascent game-based narrative traditions like jeu noir will be required, undoubtedly covering a broad range of genres, styles and influences.
References

Filmography

Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (2007) No Country for Old Men
Blake Edwards (1958-61) Peter Gunn
Ruben Fleischer (2013) Gangster Squad
Curtis Hanson (1997) LA Confidential
John Huston (1941) The Maltese Falcon
John Landis (1980) The Blues Brothers
Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tatantino (2005) Sin City
Roman Polanski (1975) Chinatown
Dick Richards (1975 – US release) Farewell My Lovely
Martin Scorcese (1976) Taxi Driver
Ridley Scott (1982) Blade Runner
Quentin Tarantino (1993) Reservoir Dogs
Orson Welles (1958) Touch of Evil
Wade Williams (1992) Detour
Michael Winner (1978) The Big Sleep
Anthony Yerkovich (1984-89) Miami Vice

Ludography

LucasArts (1998) Grim Fandango
Mad Orange (2013) Face Noir
Remedy Entertainment (2001) Max Payne
Rockstar Vancouver (2012) Max Payne 3
Team Bondi (2011) LA Noire
Telltale Games (2013) The Wolf Among Us
THE SCENT OF SUCCESS
Image-Sound Relations and Audio-logo-visuality in Baz Luhrmann’s two promotional films for Chanel No.5 perfume

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Abstract

This article analyses Baz Luhrmann’s two short promotional films for Chanel No 5 perfume (2004 and 2014) in terms of the aesthetic styles deployed for their promotional functions. The article begins by providing a contextual introduction to Luhrmann’s oeuvre and to aspects of Michel Chion’s notion of ‘audio-logo-visuality’ (2009) relevant to the director’s oeuvre. Section I discusses Luhrmann’s first Chanel No 5 commercial, made in 2004, the nature of its music track and the role of narration in the production. Section II considers Luhrmann’s reworking of the song ‘You’re the one that I want’ (from the 1978 film Grease) for his 2014 promotional film. Our discussion of the latter details the manner in which the audio-lyrical text is complemented and extended in the visual text to promote its product through a complex cluster of associations. The analyses identify two contrasting approaches to the use of music in the films’ promotion of the perfume product and two distinct patterns of audio-logo-visuality.

Keywords

Baz Luhrmann, audio-logo-visuality, advertisement, Chanel No.5

Introduction

Luhrmann is renowned for his direction of intricate, glamorous audio-visual texts in which music plays a prominent role. The five feature films, Strictly Ballroom (1992), Romeo + Juliet (1996), Moulin Rouge! (2001), Australia (2008) and The Great Gatsby (2013) constitute his best known outputs (along with his work in opera14) but he has also made a number of other short audio-visual pieces that merit attention. Two significant examples of the latter have been promotional films for Chanel No 5 perfume. The first was made in 2004, starring Nicole Kidman (lead actress in Moulin Rouge!) and the second in 2014, starring Brazilian ‘supermodel’ (and occasional actress15) Giselle Bündchen.

14 Luhrmann’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Benjamin Britten’s operatic rendition of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream was performed in Sydney, Melbourne and Edinburgh to favorable reviews in 1993 and his production of Puccini’s La Bohème was a box-office and critical hit in New York in 2003.
15 Bündchen starred in Tim Story’s 2004 film Taxi and had a supporting role in David Frankel’s The Devil Wears Prada (2006).
Cook has described the approached pursued by Luhrmann and his creative team in the period 1992-2008 as marked by “clashing genre conventions”, a “histrionic acting style that do[es] not chime with cinematic realism” and an “overheated” visual style “with a dramatic use of colour design that complements the fast editing pace and overtly mobile camera” (2010: 3). Complementing these aspects, the musical scores for his films are also highly idiosyncratic, eclectic and stylistically florid. As Coyle (2012) discusses, with specific regard to Luhrmann’s initial features (often referred to as the ‘Red Curtain Trilogy’), music is often featured in “sequences centred on spectacles, thereby challenging designations of diegetic and non-diegetic film music functions” (2012: 10-11). As she also emphasised, his distinct approach to music is manifest in his production team’s “choices of music”, “the relationships of this music to his narratives” and in “his manner of ‘versioning’ music” (ibid: 11). As Coyle’s characterisations suggest, music is not just an addendum to the audio-visuality of Luhrmann’s films but rather a complex element that informs and interacts with dialogue, plot and spectacle. The nature of his ‘versioning’ of music is a particular focus of this article, addressed here as an aspect of his strategies for marketing a designated product (in addition to the music itself). Coyle also identifies that as a result of his willingness to embrace clashing genres and new interpretations in dynamic sonic collages:

Luhrmann’s auterial approach to audio-vision bridges, at its best, syncretism in which seemingly inharmonious elements are blended and, at its worst, literalism that strives to address the broadest of audiences. (ibid: 29)

One aspect of the “literalism” that Coyle identifies above concerns what Chion has referred to as the ‘audio-logo-visual’ aspect/tendency of cinema (2009: 468), i.e. the role of (spoken) words in relation to the audio and visual elements on screen. Chion regards the former as having a powerful determining influence on the overall audio-visuality of cinema. He contends that while image-movement may give us fleeting impressions, “one element” - i.e. dialogue - “remains constrained to perpetual clarity and stability” (ibid: 170). Referring to dialogue between characters as “theatrical speech”, Chion characterises that this has “a dramatic psychological, informative, and affective function”; and goes on to assert that this “conditions not just the soundtrack but the film’s mise-en-scene in the broadest sense” (ibid: 171). In addition to this standard aspect of cinema he also characterises the function of what he terms “textual speech”, such as the off-screen voice-over, as having “the power to make visible the images that it evokes through sound—that is, to change the setting, to call up a thing, moment, place, or characters at will” (ibid: 172). These characterisations of the role of these two types of speech in cinema (which is implicitly realist, feature-length film in his analyses) are however markedly less dominant in short audiovisual media formats and genres less concerned to produce extended narrative-thematic arcs. In order to understand the role and nature of audio-logo-visuality in other types of media texts it is necessary to address the form and generic function of the productions concerned and the creative space this provides directors working with them. Subsequent sections attempt to do this with regard to Luhrmann’s two promotional films for Chanel.

Luhrmann’s 1st Chanel No 5 Film (2004)

Luhrmann’s first Chanel 5 commission came at a convenient time in that his long-planned film about the life of classical Greek hero Alexander the Great had stalled (and was subsequently shelved). The Chanel project came to Luhrmann following
Moulin Rouge! star Nicole Kidman’s employment as the promotional face of the perfume. Selected and developed by French couturier Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel (1883-1971) shortly after the end of the First World War, the perfume was launched in 1924. After achieving success in the French market, the product broke through internationally in the mid-1950s following the endorsement of Hollywood actress Marilyn Monroe\(^{16}\) and subsequently by high-profile fashion magazines such as Vogue. Following a dip in its market prominence in the 1970s, Chanel embarked on a high-profile advertising strategy including television commercials shot by rising directors such as Ridley Scott. As might be expected from a company marketing a relatively expensive perfume product, these commercials prioritised visual style and elegance and the representation of glamorous women. Like the company’s other promotional material, its television commercials strove to maintain a consistent brand image of timeless quality, despite changing fashions and socio-economic circumstances. As a result of such enterprises Chanel No 5 remains the world’s most iconic perfume and its marketing and mystique have been subject to a number of book-length studies (see, for instance, Mazzeo, 2010 and Froment, 2013). While disaggregated figures for the company’s advertising recent spend on various products are not available, its advertising budget in the United States alone in 2013 has been calculated at US $386.4 million, rising from $362 million in the previous year (Statista, 2013: online).

Following their commission to showcase Kidman’s arrival as the brand’s new face, the director and his collaborators embarked on sustained research and development of the project, in a similar manner to their research of Paris’s famous cabaret venue in their production of Moulin Rouge!\(^ {17}\) This lengthy pre-production, and the creative team’s desire to emulate the glossy extravagance of their preceding feature film collaboration with Kidman, resulted in the commercial being shot on a budget of c$42 million (Edwardes, 2004: online), an aspect that also featured heavily in publicity for the commercial. The production was set to an arrangement of ‘Clair de lune’, a solo piano tone poem by Claude Debussy written in 1890.\(^ {18}\) Tone poems (also referred to, with regard to compositions for orchestra, as symphonic poems) were a style of instrumental composition that commenced in the mid 1800s, reached a creative apogee in the late 1800s and declined in popularity after the end of World War One. Tone poetry was a product of the Romantic sensibility, which encouraged composers to produce work that was associative rather than abstract (i.e. extra-referential rather than infra-referential). While tone poems were not necessarily based on, or necessarily illustrative of, specific literary, dramatic or visual texts; many took specific works as their inspiration. Debussy produced a number of notable works in this genre, including ‘Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune’, a ten minute long orchestral composition based on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé.\(^ {19}\) Debussy’s ‘Clair de lune’, a delicate, sonorous, piano piece, with periodic ascending arpeggios and quieter, reflective passages, was an interpretation of Paul Verlaine’s eponymous poem (1869).\(^ {20}\) Verlaine’s twelve-line poem is a subtle and poignant work that combines representations of beauty with senses of ineffable sadness and loneliness, as clearly indicated in its opening verse:

\(^ {16}\) An audio recording of Monroe’s (apparently spontaneous) endorsement of the product was combined with archival images for a 2013 Chanel ad.

\(^ {17}\) It is also pertinent to note that the 50 second long ‘Green Fairy’ sequence in Moulin Rouge! (featuring Kylie Minogue as the - singing and dancing - fairy in question), can effectively be considered as an (un-commissioned) advertisement for Absinthe. (See Hayward, 2012 for an extended discussion of the sequence).

\(^ {18}\) While written in 1890 the piece was not published until 1905 when it appeared as part of ‘Suite bergamasque’.


\(^ {20}\) See Gertrude Hall’s translation online at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8426/8426-h/8426-h.htm#link2H_4_0001 - accessed May 26th 2015.
Your soul is as a moonlit landscape fair,
Peopled with maskers delicate and dim
That play on lutes and dance and have an air
Of being sad in their fantastic trim.

While there is nothing to suggest any interpretative or referential relationship between Verlaine’s poem and the narrative, scenario and/or visual design of Luhrmann’s first Chanel film, there is a significant relationship in terms of the musical score being an interpretation of the poem. This relationship is based on the complementarity of the mood/atmosphere of the poem and of the film resultant from their connection via a shared musical text.

The version of ‘Clair de lune’ recorded for the film was arranged and played by Craig Armstrong, accompanied by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Armstrong is a Scottish composer who has been a key collaborator of Luhrmann’s, working on Romeo and Juliet, Moulin Rouge! and The Great Gatsby. His arrangement of Debussy’s piece represents a substantial reworking of both the original piano piece and subsequent orchestral arrangements and only used fractions of the original, highlighting some of its most prominent melodic themes and harmonic progressions to fashion the short film’s score.

The film was released in several versions. The core visual narrative, which comprises the principal and shortest version (just over two minutes in length), is introduced by a male character’s narration that establishes Kidman as a famous beauty who temporarily runs away from her pressured professional life for a brief romantic dalliance with a male whose identity/occupation remains mysterious. The film also features dialogue and interaction between Kidman and the male. In many ways, the narrative essentially reprises aspects of Kidman’s role as Satine from Moulin Rouge! and her dalliance with the penniless poet, Christian (Ewan McGregor). Like Moulin Rouge!, the film features glittery cityscapes and a world of rooftop signs, against which the characters pose. These sequences, introduced by and later reflected upon by the male character’s voiceover, epitomise the tendency identified by Chion “in so many occurrences of textual speech in films” whereby “the mise-en-scene takes care to give the image a stylised, artificial, and general turn (by controlling light, setting, and costumes), as if to bring the image more closely in line with the text.” (2009: 174)

The music provides a constant underscore that shares the filmic audio-space with both voiceover sequences and brief snippets of dialogue. In the opening 25 seconds, sustained high-pitched strings accompany the piano, which plays a variation of the opening four bars of Debussy’s original piece. However here the piano part is transposed from a major to minor key (Db) providing a solemn and stately mood that gives dignity and gravitas to the narrator’s question “When did I wake into this

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21 An extended 5.35 long-form version complicates elements of the core narrative and intersperses this with production sequences that combine to emphasise the design concerns and major production ‘back-story’ to the ad’s production. The film opens with a black and white sequence evocative of the 1950s (which the orchestration colours with a rumbling, slightly ominous passage not present in the short version), the imagery then transitions to colour (foregrounding its artifice through images of video screens and clapperboards). After showing Kidman in Times Square in her elaborate white dress, its designer (recognisable to fashion cognoscenti as Karl Lagerfeld) is then shown sketching and developing the design before the film shows us the featured jewellery. It then switches back to quasi-documentary production sequences from the shoot that lead to the film’s concluding red carpet and logo sequence. The extended version (somewhat heavy-handedly) serves to emphasise the (highly expensive) processes and personnel involved in the production, effectively showing the film’s budgetary ‘expense trails’ and emphasising the scale of Chanel’s spend as a factor in public estimation of the product (at the same time as further glamourising it by association with Lagerfeld and high-end jewellers).
dream?” This mood continues during one of the film’s most visually arresting sequences, which sees Kidman trapped in the middle of the street near Times Square after running from a cab wearing an impractically long and feathery white dress. As she gets caught by paparazzi, looking like a deer caught in headlights, a low sustained Eb synth/string note fades in, synchronised with a camera flash, shifting the tonal centre. The piano part then returns to the original Db major tonality and plays the next 4 bars (5-8) of the original almost as written, with a sustained string accompaniment. Having escaped the throng, and now seated in the rear of a cab next to her male confidant, the music shifts as Kidman directs the taxi driver to “drive”. The opening melodic theme is then stated by a full string orchestra, as the image shows Kidman and her lover safely above the throng on a building’s roof. Illustrating Armstrong’s virtual collaging of elements of Debussy’s original, the theme here is condensed from the original six bar length to four, and fragments from four of the original (bars 15, 24-26) are used leading back to a restatement of the previous melodic theme with harp and woodwinds added to the lush strings sound. A swell on the cymbals and a ‘woosh’ sound effect accompanying the image of spotlights crossing in the sky (evoking the spotlights that summon Batman to help the inhabitants of Gotham city) heralds the appearance of the arpeggiated I – iii – I - iii chord movement from the original (bars 66 – 69). This chord movement is first stated by the strings and then, with harp added, as the sequence cuts back to Kidman back on the ground and back in her usual life, climbing red-carpeted stairs.

Direct product representation is discrete (with the iconic perfume bottle entirely absent) and with the product only referenced through its icon, initially glimpsed unobtrusively as rooftop signage, until the final sequence shows a (now far more composed) Kidman wearing a diamond ‘No 5’ pendant over an expanse of her back, revealed by the plunging cut of her black dress. The film’s final voice-over has the male asking, “Has she forgotten?” As if in answer, Kidman turns her head and the music returns to the beginning of Debussy’s original composition, with the piano playing the opening two bars before moving to a tranquil, piano-led coda accompanying the phrase “I know I will not - her kiss, her smile…” that swells to a full orchestra, tonic chord resolution to accompany the final spoken words “her perfume”. The combination of the glittering pendant logo with the word “perfume” leaves no ambiguity about the focal emphasis of the film, providing a final audio-visual reminder of the product that provides the text’s raison d’etre.

For listeners familiar with the original ‘Clare de lune’ (who might be surmised to be in the minority, given the film’s wide exposure) the film’s underscore provides fleeting associations that are recognisable and evocative, referencing a longer and more substantial musical work. For others it provides a less specific connotation of sensitivity, sophistication and/or Frenchness/Europeanness appropriate to its product image and associations. The composite associations of the music and of the glamorous visual representation of Manhattan provide the film’s promoted product – i.e. its perfume – with a very specific inflection. One of the more notable aspects of Luhrmann’s second Chanel film, produced a decade later, is the manner in which he deviated from this approach and sought to rework elements of a seminal kitsch/retro representation of American popular culture, mobilising a significantly different set of associations and different audiovisual and audio-logo-centric strategies.
'You’re the one that I want’ and Grease (1978)

Unlike his first Chanel film, set to an orchestral arrangement of a celebrated art music piece; Luhrmann’s second No 5 film featured an extended re-arrangement of an iconic popular song, ‘You’re the one that I want’, from the 1978 musical-comedy film Grease. Directed by Randal Kleiser and set in California in the summer of 1959, Grease’s narrative concerned the antics of a diverse bunch of final year high school students. The film was a major international hit upon release in 1978. Made on a budget of $6 million, the film went on to gross $393,955,690 (Box Office Mojo, 2014: online). The project had an extended gestation, before being mounted as a successful Broadway musical in 1972 (and was also produced internationally, including in Australia in 1973). A film adaptation by Allen Carr and Bronte Woodard followed in 1978 that introduced a number of new songs, including two of the most subsequently popular, Sandy’s tender ballad, ‘Hopelessly devoted to you’ (addressed to her love interest, Danny) and the couple’s highlight, love-affirming duet, on ‘You’re the one that I want’. Like the film, the film’s soundtrack was a major success. The album topped the US, UK and Australian charts and sold eight million copies in the five years following its release, spawning three number 1 US singles, including ‘You’re the one that I want’ (which also topped the Australian charts).

A significant element in the film’s and soundtrack’s appeal in Australia was the presence of Australian singer Olivia Newton-John as Sandy and the (inter-cultural) chemistry of her relationship with actor John Travolta (as Danny). The couple’s showpiece song features in the narrative at a point when Danny has shed his greaser image in order to appeal to Sandy, who had been wary of his subcultural style and its connotations. Visiting a fairground, he encounters a group of his old friends who tease him about his new, ‘respectable’ appearance. This interaction is broken by the arrival of Sandy, who has transitioned the other way and is now dressed in leather trousers and jacket, with fluffed up hair and high-heels and smoking a cigarette. Her arrival on-screen is synchronised with the start of a blues piano riff. The song’s introduction kicks in as a rockabilly style rhythm bed laid down by drums, bass, guitar and piano. Danny then expresses his admiration for the new, highly-sexualised Sandy by singing, in an exaggerated, theatrical manner:

I got chills, they're multiplying
And I'm losing control
’Cause the power, you’re supplying
It’s electrifying!

Shedding his jacket and starting to dance during the verse, Danny drops to his knees to further express the erotic shock of Sandy’s ‘makeover’. Urged on by her friends, she drops and crushes her cigarette, then casually pushes the rising Danny over with her foot before strutting around singing, in a clear, controlled voice:

You better shape up, 'cause I need a man
And my heart is set on you
You better shape up, you better understand
To my heart I must be true

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22 It was initially conceived by Jim Jacobs in 1970, with the idea for a stage musical featuring 1950s pop and R n’ B hits (Neutze, 2013: online). Developed it into a musical drama about final year High School students, the play was first staged at Chicago’s Kingston Miles Theatre in 1972.

23 In a version directed by Ross Coleman and starring Australian performers David Atkins, Tina Bursill and Denise Drysdale.

24 With the final word treated with audio delay, as if to give an ‘electrified’ quality to the sound.
Chorus vocals, visually represented as performed by Sandy together with Danny and Sandy’s female friends, alternate variants on “You’re the one that I want” and “Oo, Oo, Oo honey” before resolving with “You’re the one that I need/ Yes indeed”. Totally smitten, Danny follows Sandy as she dances around. After emerging from a fairground attraction on which the words ‘Danger Ahead’ are painted, she entices Danny towards her singing:

If you’re filled with affection
You’re too shy to convey
Meditate my in direction
Feel your way

Following her up a gangway, the duo alternate lines:

Danny: I better shape up, ’cause you need a man
Sandy: I need a man who can keep me satisfied
Danny: I better shape up, if I’m gonna prove
Sandy: You better prove that my faith is justified
Danny: Are you sure?
Sandy: Yes I’m sure down deep inside

Multiple renditions of the chorus see the couple dancing amorously together on a ‘Shake Shack’ stage and then a whole fairground of teenagers join in dancing and clowning until Danny finishes the number off by hitting a high striker with a hammer, ringing its bell and landing a prize (implicitly Sandy and/or his anticipated sexual congress with her).

The film sequence described above marks the start of an intimate relationship between the couple and can be interpreted as a passage in which the clear differences between the cultural, class and/or subcultural contexts of the protagonists are dissolved in the energetic context of the song and dance number. In terms of Chion’s earlier characterisations of the audio-logo-visual nature of film texts, the duet and its ensemble choruses can be considered as a form of musicalised “theatrical speech” (2009: 170) but, at the same time, the whole song and dance number (and its screen visualisation) exist to deliver the dialogical interaction between the characters in a captivating manner. The sequence matches the mood of the film’s nostalgic re-imagination of the late 1950s as a time of relative innocence and simplicity, at least (as depicted) for those approaching adulthood. By contrast, the milieu and characters of Luhrmann’s 2014 film are more specifically representative of an older (implicitly 30-40 year old) moneyed class in a glamorous/glamourised present.

Luhrmann’s 2nd No. 5 film (2014)

In an interview in *Vanity Fair* magazine in 2014, Luhrmann stated his intention to pursue a contemporary realism in his second Chanel production that was in marked contrast to his first No. 5 film:

*The Chanel No. 5 woman in the time of Nicole was the world at that time. The world was so enamored with pure romanticism, and I think Gisele represents the Chanel No. 5 woman now. Meaning, she can be doing sports on the beach, have a moment to herself and own it. She can have a child.*
She can have a real job. Her job, where she creates inspirational images for women, doesn’t mean she can’t have stress or have a complicated relationship. All those things that we actually know—to go with all of that isn’t fantasy, it is reality. But it doesn’t mean she needs to forego romance, and escape, and put on a beautiful dress, and have a moment and sensuality. So, having it all does not come easily. That’s the film—it isn’t all just pretty smiles and flowers. (Grinnell, 2014: online)

Luhrmann’s characterisation of Chanel’s current paradigm of a professional (super-) woman as an aspirational role model is obviously complex and contentious. But for the purposes of this essay it is most striking that Luhrmann chose a track to accompany such a representation that was so steeped in a previous cultural moment and its associations that it might almost seem ‘over-burdened’ with its prior connotations. In No 5: The Song, one of the short ‘making of’ films released to complement the premiere of the main film, Luhrmann made reference to the work of celebrated haute couture designer Karl Lagerfeld (who also designed Kidman’s dresses in the 2004 film) to explain the process by which the original Grease duet track was reinterpreted in a manner that he deemed appropriate as the (sole) soundtrack element of his second No 5 film:

Like Karl does so brilliantly in his work – he’s always able to take something very classical, something you think that you know, and he’s able to turn it over and find a new experience there. So I wanted to find that in a musical idea...

This comparison of fashion design and music creation is somewhat cryptic. In one sense – the sense that Luhrmann appears to offer – it might be taken to refer to the modification of design elements in order to refresh established styles and to make them somehow more relevant to a contemporary sensibility. In another, and by no means uncomplementary sense, it might be perceived that the “new experience” apparently offered is as much about the packaging and promotion of stylistic modifications as it is about the actual textual modifications themselves.

The idea for a cover of ‘You’re the one that I want’ was suggested by Luhrmann’s musical supervisor, Anton Monsted, who was aware that American singer/violinist/arranger Matthew Hemerlein, who currently works under the name Lo-Fang, was interested to record a radically different interpretation of the song. In a carefully staged piece of what might be termed ‘documentary theatre’, the ‘making of’ film shows Luhrmann in a film studio with Lo-Fang as the director explain his thought processes: “I was thinking, ‘how could that possibly be right?’ you know because we know it as [sings indistinctly] ‘I’ve got hands ah yah yah…’” [snaps fingers]. The scene then cuts to Lo-Fang singing “and my heart is set on you” accompanied only by his pizzicato violin as the director touches his arm and nods in encouragement. Luhrmann resumes his address to camera with the following characterisation:

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25 The artist released his debut album *Hot Nickels* under his original name in 2011 before adopting his current professional moniker for his 2014 album *Blue Film*.

26 Lo-Fang has stated that he started working on his version of the song in 2010 when he was “just sketching songs” that he liked and that he “liked those reverse guitar sounds plus the bassline in the chorus is very compelling… Somehow the melody and the lyrics spoke to me” (in Darwin, 2014: online).

27 This is a mis-remembered line, “thrills” being the correct lyric rather than “hands”.
You immediately feel ‘Errr… Do I know that song? I think I know that song’. So it feels familiar and then when you do realize you know it - at that moment I think you enjoy more that there’s more to it.\textsuperscript{28}

After a brief interlude showing Lo-Fang singing the line “I’ve got chills, they’re multiplying and I’m losing control” while Luhrmann shoots his performance on a digital camera, the director resumes:

\textit{When I heard the interpretation I went ‘He’s done exactly with that classic song what Karl does with fashion. He’s taken something you think you know and he’s shown you a different emotional take, a different way in.}

Luhrmann also goes on to characterise that:

\textit{I think that’s the mark of a classic. A classic anything be it a play or a piece of music, a film - the thing about a classic is that it can move through time and it can be reinterpreted many ways at many different times but it still is able to possess its fundamental meaning.}

These statements raise more questions than they answer. What is the nature of the ‘classic’ status identified here (with some unspecified “fundamental meaning”) and how is it open to reinterpretation? In Luhrmann’s work there appears to be a perception of ‘the classic’ persisting in a socio-cultural space that is somehow generalistic rather than specific.\textsuperscript{29} Given Luhrmann’s propensity to rework well-established cultural texts (such as Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’) such a perception may be close to his creative heart. But, again, this statement is somewhat problematic in that the test of whether a work is ‘a classic’ (or not) is premised on its retaining its “fundamental meaning”. But what is that, and who assesses what it means and whether it persists in subsequent versions?

Lo Fang’s 2014 remake of the original (recorded) version of the song maintains the same basic formal structure with only slightly modified lyrics and melody, but differs substantially in terms of textural and rhythmic elements. The tempo of the remake is significantly slower (60bpm as opposed to 107 bpm for the original) and the key is raised a tone from the original (B minor and relative D major) and the track features sound sources that reference both classical music and electronic dance music styles. The song opens with short excerpts of reverse piano and bowed strings and two-note piano ostinato that presage the pizzicato violin ostinato that continues throughout the verse and pre chorus sections. Guitar (or possibly keys/synth sound) chords accent beat one of the verses with a reverse delay of this sound panned across the stereo spectrum to fill out the texture in each bar. An irregular kick drum pattern, low in the mix, punctuates the close mic-ed and breathy vocal delivery in the first verse.

\textsuperscript{28} Luhrmann also states, somewhat cryptically, that what appealed to him about Lo-Fang’s version was that, “he played the sub-text, not the idea on top”. No further discussion of what Luhrmann regarded as the either the “sub-text” or “idea on top” is provided and the analyses presented in this article fail to illuminate the remark further.

\textsuperscript{29} This latter point reflects something of a contradiction in that, at various times, Luhrmann appears to represent himself as part of a transnational cultural space and, at others, to be specifically implicated in Australian cultural traditions. With regard to his second Chanel No 5 film, for instance, it is significant that while he did not refer to the matter in any of his discussions of his song choice for the film, he had previous sought to include a radical revision of another Olivia Newton-John song in a previous production; initially intending to feature a slow, sultry cover of Newton-John’s 1981 hit single ‘Physical’ by fellow Australian singer Kylie Minogue in \textit{Moulin Rouge!} (see Hayward, 2013: 32-33). The aspects of the song referred to by Luhrmann might therefore be seen as both classic in an international arena and also classic within a distinctly Australian sphere of cultural experience.
The pre-chorus section is the peak dynamic section of the track. In its first instance, its texture includes a glitch style beat comprised of modified sampled sounds (hi hat, rim shot, kick drum and other slow attack mid-range frequency noise sounds), a descending arpeggiated bass synth part, reverse low range piano notes and vocal harmonies a third above the main melody. Unlike the original, the climax of the pre-chorus has the hook line delivered over minimal instrumentation (slow swelling keys sound and pizzicato double bass) and without the follow up lyrics (i.e., “you are the one I want, ooh, ooh, ooh, honey”). New sounds are introduced in the second verse (high pitch reverse bell-like sounds, slow attack distorted guitar notes) and the pre-chorus (an elaborate bowed string arrangement. The final chorus is delivered over minimal instrumental backing, this time with a gentle backing vocal section (in a slow and barely recognizable reference to the original – ‘ooh, ooh, ooh’), descending bass synth arpeggio and a tranquil bowed string arrangement. Harmonically the track retains the basic elements of the original although a IV chord is swapped for the vi chord in the pre-chorus (i.e., I, III7, IV, vi instead of I, III7, vi, IV) and the chorus is much simplified to a basic I – V movement.

In addition to the cutting of lyrics from the chorus, Lo Fang’s version has some subtle lyrical changes in the pre-chorus to reflect the shift from the original duet version to a solo one. These involve the lines “You better shape up, cause you need a man” (our emphases). The second pre-chorus section is also altered as follows:

1. *If I’m gonna prove – replaced with - You better prove*
2. *That my faith is justified – replaced with - Are you sure?*
3. *Yes I’m sure down deep inside*

The song forms a pre-constituted soundtrack that the film’s imagery and narrative fragments can be set to without the additionally complicated effects of (synchronised) dialogue or narration. Explaining the role of music in the film, Luhrmann has stated that, “there’s no dialogue in this little film, the song itself is the narration” (*No 5: The Song*). While Luhrmann doesn’t make the association explicit, the form he refers to, where the lyrics generate the narrative scenarios, is a standard music video one. Lo-Fang’s various appearances lip-synching are also classic music video devices. Similarly, while the presence of an identifiable (non-musical) star in the narrative is far from common across the entire spectrum of music video productions, high profile personalities have frequently featured in high-budget productions, including a variety of recognisable super-models deployed to glamourise music videos’ visual tracks.30

Chion has referred to music video’s “joyous rhetoric of images”, which he notes is unlike cinema “since it does not involve dramatic time”, creating “a sense of visual polyphony” (2009: 166). He also asserts that:

*music video leads us back to the silent cinema—seemingly a paradox, since we’re talking about a form constructed on music. But it is precisely insofar as music does form its basis, and none of the narration is propelled by dialogue, that the music video’s image is fully liberated from the linearity normally imposed by sound... the two are not wholly independent from each other. But this relation is often limited to points of synchronization,*

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30 Such as Christie Brinkley in the video for Billy Joel’s *Uptown Girl* video (1983), Kate Moss in the White Stripes *I just don’t know what to do with myself* (2003) or Kate Upton in Lady Antebellum’s *Bartender* (2014).
where the image matches the production of sound in some way. The rest of the time each goes its separate way. (ibid: 167)

Chion’s initial comparative point is salient, and might also be extended via a consideration of the similarity of the acting mode and styles of those performing in narrative elements of music videos to those of ‘silent’ cinema. Yet there is a degree of misinterpretation of the degree of liberation from linearity identified as “imposed by sound”. This involves the extent to which the song words featured in music videos in many cases determine aspects of the visual track of the music video and, often, of action and/or character interaction sequences in these. In this manner the “points of synchronization” are not just with the “sound” but often with connotative or denotative aspects of words, phrases or longer arcs of sung text. In some instances, music videos blend lip-synching with visual sequences that enact the lyrical scenarios via narratives (such as The Dixie Chicks’ video ‘Goodbye Earl’ [2000]), build entire scenarios around fragments of lyrics (such as The Aphex Twin’s ‘Come to Daddy’ [1997]) or else represent aspects of the lyrics in visual tandem with their vocalisation (as in ALL CAPS’ ‘Delete You’ [2011]). Indeed, rather than the “liberation” of image from sung text, one common aspect of music videos concerns the manner in which the inter-relation between the two can be enacted.

One of the few deviations from standard music video form in Luhrmann’s 2014 Chanel film results from its raison d’etre as a promotional device for a commodity other than the track and its performer (which it also provides a music video for in the classic manner). Along with the singer and glamorous lead actors, Chanel No 5 perfume has a central, iconic presence in the film (despite its fleeting representation on-screen) and the other performers, despite their greater prominence, are effectively the product’s supporting cast. The film features three main characters: Bündchen, effectively playing herself,31 actor Michiel Huisman as her love interest and Lo-Fang, playing himself, singing in a nightclub. (NB due to the absence of any fictional character names in the film, the film’s characters are referred to below by their performer surnames.) The film’s footage combines material from 3 main locations32:

1. The ocean and the adjacent house. (The location for the first two minutes of the film)
2. The night club where Lo-Fang sings and which Huisman enters in advance of Bündchen, who arrives at the end to re-unite with him
3. The photographic studio, where Bündchen is briefly shown working

Lo-Fang’s version of the Grease song dispenses with the male/female duet and ensemble chorus structure and delivers the lyric entirely from a male viewpoint. In a similar manner to that of Luhrmann’s first Chanel film, which was organised around the male character’s memories and reflections, he has stated that Lo-Fang’s performance voices “the thoughts in the man’s head” (No 5: The Song) and the implication is that the representation of Bündchen is effectively through Huisman’s eyes, in a similar manner to Kidman’s visualisation through the eyes of the 2004 Chanel film’s male character.

The following paragraphs give some sense of the complex manner in which the film creates drama through intercut narrative/thematic sequences that are (particularly in the first minute, during which the elements of drama are established) closely tied

31 In that she plays a model who also surfs.
32 Additional sequences include Bündchen walking down a city alley and driving into the city over bridges.
to, if somewhat ambiguously illustrative of, the song’s lyrics. The discussion also
details how the film operates as what might be regarded a visual-narrative tone
poem (inverting the relationship of previously discussed musical tone poems to
extra-musical referents) premised on both the lyrical and musical content of the
music track it is set to.

The film opens by rapidly establishing a sense of drama. The first three seconds
show images of waves breaking on the surface of the sea, shot from under the
surface, accompanied by a bowed string and reverse piano part. The music develops
in a manner reminiscent of John Williams’ famous theme to Spielberg’s Jaws
(1975), albeit with a more consonant ascending major 2nd (B – C#) as opposed to a
minor 2nd interval. This builds tension that is complicated, rather than offset, by a
floating higher register piano ostinato (F# - B) that accompanies a wide panning
shot of a city at night. This is followed by a two second sequence of a female figure,
seen in long shot from behind, running with a skipping motion through a neon
illuminated alley lit by two Chanel No 5 logos. These two musical cues set a
somewhat ominous feel (through the low register, reverse sounds) and ambiguous
tone (harmonically the pitch content suggests a Bsus2 chord - neither major or
minor). At 0.07 the sea image returns, this time showing the silhouette of a woman
on a surfboard, shot from underneath, rising up to crest a wave as the image cross-
fades to a medium close-up of Lo-Fang singing the opening line of lyrics, “I’ve got
chills, they’re multiplying”. Prior to the vocal entry, the musical score functions to
create atmosphere (and a degree of tension/enigma) in a standard (if well-
crafted) cinematic manner. Given that there is nothing in the initial (pre-
vocal) musical sequence to suggest the instrumental score as related to the
Grease song, the first (and subsequent) lines of lyrics constitute just the element of surprise that
Luhrmann refers to above (at least for those audience members familiar with the
song and/or the film in which it was originally featured).

As Lo-Fang gets to the word “chills”, the image cross-fades to a shot of a body-
suited female plunging feet-first downwards into the water. Given the wetsuit,
the image suggests “chills” as related to the cold of the water. The air bubbles
surrounding the submerged figure then appear to be superimposed over a brief
image of Lo-Fang singing “multiplying” before the singer’s image is replaced by a
Chanel No.5 logo surrounded by similar bubbles. As the lyrics state “And I’m losing”
a complex cross-fade includes Lo-Fang, to left of image, the bubbles and a closer
shot of the female that shows her buttocks exposed to the water by her upper-body
suit. As the lyrics transition from “losing” to “control” the image shows the swimmer
gracefully rising to the surface, again from behind. Then, on the final syllable of
“control” the image shows the male protagonist walking along a balcony in the
theatre that Lo-Fang is performing in. As the singer intones “because the power”,
the swimmer is shown, swimming back up to her surfboard on the surface. With
the words “you’re supplying”, the swimmer’s face is glimpsed as she rises towards
and breaks the surface, climbing on to a board marked with two prominent Chanel
logos (and with a large house on the shore in the background). On the word
“supplying”, and in a sequence that is only one second long, the male protagonist is
shown clearly, face to camera in a room whose square windows are similar to those
of the house glimpsed from the water. His expression is ambiguous but he is clearly
unsettled, presumably related to a letter he holds in his hands, low in the screen
image, as he looks passed the camera. On the word “electrifying” the image shows
Bündchen in medium shot, face to camera, clearly recognisable for the first time,
and with her expression – together with her looking passed the camera - suggesting
a ‘look back’ to the house and the male. The shot returns to the male, again looking
out, unnerved, before the image transitions to an overhead shot of Bündchen
paddling her board forward urgently before transitioning to a more lingering shot of her raising her torso on her board to reveal the board’s Chanel logo before rising and surfing a breaking wave.

The surfing section is cleverly ambiguous and highly accomplished in terms of its suturing of primal oceanic and domestic interior spatialities. The tension and cutting between character looks off-screen, followed by Bündchen’s urgent forward paddling, initially seem to indicate some drama in-progress between the characters but this is undercut (or, at least, complicated) when she reaches the wave, which is thereby suggested as what she is most strongly pursuing. Further irony and ambiguity is given by the sequence unfolding to the lyrics “you’d better shape up”. Given that her bodily shape appears to be more than satisfactory, the “shape up” lyric seems to refer to more emotional matters. The image of her on the wave returns the sense of emotional drama, as it reveals her looking off-screen – clearly not ‘in the moment’ of her wave-ride – implicitly staring towards the house and the male with a troubled expression as the lyrics intone “because you” before the image returns to Huisman (on the balcony of the venue again) as they state “need”, only to return to a dramatic overhead surfing sequence as they state “a man”. The juxtaposition of image and lyric is complex here. Instead of images of vulnerability, which might seem appropriate to such a lyrical emphasis, the visual sequence shows Bündchen as supremely at home in her environment and showing pleasure in her ability to ride some not inconsiderable waves (the sequence around 0.55 shows her surfing the face of a wave around 3-4 metres in height). The “need a man” aspect of the lyrics is thereby suggested as less a protective need and more of an emotional one. At 0.52 Lo-Fang sings “and my heart” as the image cuts to Huisman’s face in the house room (again looking troubled) as the lyric continues, “is set on you”. The image then returns to Bündchen surfing down the face of a large wave, before cutting to a close-up juxtaposing her emotionally tense face with a wall of water behind her. At 0.58, complementing the lyric “you better shape up” the image shows Huisman placing an envelope down. Although difficult to glimpse on first viewing, the inscription written on the envelope’s front continues the lyrics with its inscription, “To my heart I must be true”. As he places the envelope, the image cuts to another overhead of Bündchen surfing. The phrase “You better” starts during the overhead image, with the phrase continuing “understand” as Bündchen emerges from the water, carrying her board just as the image shows Huisman leaving the note (with its inscription now clearly visible) on a glass coffee table. As the lyrics repeat the inscription on the letter, Bündchen is shown in medium long shot, witnessing Huisman’s exit from the house with some concern.

The 1.11 long sequence described in detail above illustrates the manner in which the short film creates narrative tension and ambiguity through frequent and highly effective cross-cutting that is given significant thematic colouration and complexity through close editing to lyrical passages and to the song’s slow, almost stately rhythms. Having created a sense of the protagonists’ relationship as in a moment of crisis, the film continues to sketch the female’s complex life through introducing her children into the narrative before she finds the note. The potential disruption of the note is foreshadowed when piercing high pitched reverse bell-like sounds and a relatively harsh, distorted guitar line enter, adding an extra level of tension to the music that links with the narrative development unfolding on screen. At this moment the child enters the frame and then, whilst hugging her, Bündchen spots the envelope left by Huisman, thus setting up a duty/romance conflict. Unlike

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33 We are aware that this may be a stunt double rather than Bündchen herself but the visual sequence clearly attempts to represent it as her.
Luhrmann’s earlier No. 5 film, in which the iconic No.5 bottle does not appear, the tone of the narrative shifts around 2.04 as Bündchen sprays No.5 in the air in front of her daughter, to break the mood and to cheer her daughter before she departs for school. But this is undercut musically, as the close-up shot of mother and child is synchronised with the movement to the III7 chord in the pre chorus, harmonically the most dissonant part of the chord progression.

At this point, the film shifts to represent the Bündchen character’s professional life as a model, showing her posing and twirling for the camera in a studio, with Luhrmann directing the shoot, together with prominent No.5 logos. Re-integrating the two threads, she is shown reading the letter in the studio, before being called back to the shoot by Luhrmann. She responds by running out of the studios and is shown driving over Queensboro Bridge into Manhattan in an open-topped car, finally arriving at the venue where Lo-Fang is playing the song live (as in the previous intercut sections of the performer). She then approaches Huisman with a Chanel No.5 pendant swinging around her back (in a similar image to that of Kidman’s back in Luhrmann’s preceding Chanel film) and embraces him as the lyrics state “And my heart is set on you). The two then kiss passionately as Lo-Fang sings (“one that I need”) turning away from the lovers, as if recognising their need for privacy. The film ends with Bündchen’s warm smile and a final caption image that states - with suitable audio-logo-visual finality - ‘5 #ONETHATIWANT’.

Conclusion

The sonic (re-)interpretation of ‘You’re the one that I want’ by Lo-Fang for Luhrmann’s film has a number of significant stylistic differences from the 1978 original. Along with matters of pace, texture and vocal style, the most significantly different aspect concerns purpose – the former being a lively, up-tempo number that brings lovers together in the feature film narrative (for the first time); whereas the latter is a slower, sultry and reflective track that delineates the tensions and delicate dynamics of two established lovers. While Lo-Fang’s version clearly draws on and reinterprets the original cast music recording, Luhrmann’s 2014 film shows no sign of addressing any aspect of Grease’s narrative, visual design or editing style. Instead, Luhrmann’s film is a densely constructed and finely wrought representation of the particular tension and ambiguity between two adult lovers. Whereas Danny and Sandy duet in Grease dressed in costumes that they have donned (‘out of character’) to pursue each other; Bündchen and Huisman (like Kidman and her confidant in the 2004 film) are very much ‘themselves’, inasmuch as they wear elegant clothes that seem appropriate to their age, wealth and class positions (and the product’s ostensible demographic).

The orchestration of imagery to the soundtracks of both No. 5 films involves what Coyle (2012: 29) describes as the director’s tendency to combine both literalism (in audio-logo-visual aspects) and syncretism, in blending seemingly inharmonious elements (such as intercutting between the surf and the interior of a home through implied exchanges of glance off-camera in the 2014 film). Rather than elements of Debussy’s original composition or Grease’s audio-visual presentation of ‘You’re the one that I want’ providing identifiable subtexts for the director to re-work; they might be better thought of as pre-texts (in both senses of the term) - with the

34 An image that recalls similar scenes from The Great Gatsby.
35 We state “ostensible” as products are often marketed to audiences as emblematic of a particular life style above their target purchaser’s actual socio-economic level.
exercise of re-envisioning the originals serving to facilitate a particularly ‘free’ approach to narrative. In this manner, the notional functionality of taking a commercial commission shot to a single music piece can be seen to have allowed the director to have subtly rendered two distinct visual-narrative tone works that merit consideration within the main body of his work rather being regarded as trivial commercial addenda. Specific product association is rendered within a complementary audiovisual embodiment of glamour and romantic ambiguity and tension. The films generate creative spaces that are far more than frameworks for product placement and are, thereby, all the more effective promotional devices for the product concerned.

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SOUND ACROSS SERIES
Theme tunes as leitmotif in Chris Lilley’s television series

Liz Giuffre and Mark Evans

Abstract

Australian writer/performer/composer Chris Lilley has developed a distinctive style of satirical screen storytelling. So far he has written, produced, appeared in and composed music for five series, We Can Be Heroes (2005), Summer Heights High (2007), Angry Boys (2011), Ja’mie Private School Girl (2013) and Jonah From Tonga (2014), and while much has been written about his comedic use of dialogue and visual characterizations, to date there has been no analysis of Lilley’s distinctive use of sound to brand his work within and across his series. This paper looks at Lilley as a character comedian and composer, focusing on his use of sound to comment on urban Australia and its cultural sensibilities. We argue that his use of sound, particularly original music, has helped him brand individual series as well as create a cross-series form of sonic identification.

Keywords

Television, theme tunes, music, comedy, genre

Introducing the musical character of Chris Lilley

Chris Lilley is one of Australia’s most successful contemporary comedians, having gained local and international critical acclaim. Specialising in the creation of character-based television series, since 2005 he has developed five series for the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) in Australia, with some of these also funded in part by HBO in America and the BBC in the UK. Working with local Melbourne-based production company Princess Pictures, Lilley’s work has helped build a strong foundation for a new wave of Australian television comedy, particularly a suite of productions that, according to the producers, develop “new ideas, stories that haven’t been told or ways of telling stories that make audiences look at the world differently, especially with comedy” (Princess Pictures: online).

Chris Lilley has used music in his various projects to deliver comedic content including the use of diegetic and non-diegetic musical jokes and the development of comedic situations. Throughout his various series he has used musical performances as punchlines, first gaining significant attention and success with the “Indigeridoo” sequence from We Can Be Heroes (2005), a segment he was asked to recreate for the Australian television industry’s annual awards, The Logies, in 2006 (Bellman, 2006). Originally performed as part of a backstage musical parody
sequence in the original mockumentary series about the search for the Australian of the Year, “Indigeridoo” was the title song for a musical developed by the fictional Chinese students’ theatre group featured in the show. The musical’s aim was to retell the story of Indigenous Australia, and when performed by Chinese medical student Ricky Wong (played by Lilley) and other actors as part of the group, the lyrical puns and tokenistic imagery (demonstrated in Figure 1 below), combined with a clichéd performance style of high school, piano based musical theatre, created a now iconic piece of Australian television comedy that has been included in the Australian Screen repository and curated by a specialist screen commentator (see Figure 2 below).  

![Figure 1](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/heroes/ricky/lyrics.htm)  

Figure 1: Screenshot of ABC TV’s website still featuring the “Indigeridoo” song sheet, now a decade after the original broadcast of the series. Taken from http://www.abc.net.au/tv/heroes/ricky/lyrics.htm, accessed 14/4/15.

![Figure 2](http://aso.gov.au/titles/tv/we-can-be-heroes-episode-3/clip1/)  

Figure 2: Screenshot of the “Indigeridoo” segment as now housed at the Australian Screen repository. Taken from http://aso.gov.au/titles/tv/we-can-be-heroes-episode-3/clip1/, accessed 14/4/15.

While not the focus of this paper, it should be noted that more recent Lilley productions have been criticized for exaggerated racial characterization that includes the use of blackface when playing the Polynesian character, Jonah. Details of these concerns have been well summarised and explored by Polynesian media commentator Morgan Godfery (2014).
In subsequent series Lilley continued this mockumentary and backstage musical performance presentation. In particular, the presentation of “A Bad Girl with a Bad Habit” by the high school drama/music teacher character of Mr G for *Summer Heights High* (2007) and the various tracks presented by rapper S.Mouse’s in *Angry Boys* (2011), including the single “Smack My Elbow”. In each case Lilley, the real-life composer, performed the songs as part of his characterisation on screen, allowing each character to claim ownership of these compositions during the course of the diegesis.

Of course Lilley’s series do draw on existing conventions and expectations. However, the most obviously ‘borrowed’ musical reference; the quoting of the David Bowie lyric for his first series title (“We Can Be Heroes”) is something that has been so overshadowed by Lilley’s own creations that we have not come across one media or academic review that cite it. Similarly, the performance within a performance style used in the examples above is a technique that many musicals have used across television and film. The relatively low budget production style, use of voice over and direct-to-camera address has meant that Lilley’s work has been categorised by organisations like Australian Screen as a ‘mockumentary’ (Matthews, 2015) rather than aligned with musicals.

The existing academic work exploring Lilley’s creations acknowledges his masterful development of individual characters to connect to audiences. In an overview of the second Lilley series, *Summer Heights High*, O’Hara (2007) focuses on the development of Lilley’s schoolgirl character Ja’mie. Although this character had previously appeared in *We Can Be Heroes*, O’Hara gives weight to the contextualization of the character within the contemporary Australian school system, arguing that “Summer Heights High does not play for laughs, which is part of why it is so funny … it is a hilarious and accurate picture of a lot of what happens in schools today” (O’Hara, 2007: 72).

Importantly, Turnbull argues that Lilley’s work is some of the few pieces of Australian output that has not been lost in international and local translation (2010). Discussing the place of the Australian television industry’s output in contemporary global discussions of the medium, she contextualises Lilley’s work as innovative in terms of its reach and approach; saying “What’s exciting is not only Lilley’s growing international recognition, but also the possibility that as an Australian television scholar I too might get a chance at a world stage … talking about some Australian television (other than soap opera) that people might actually have seen” (2010: 112). Lilley’s work in establishing a renewed faith in Australian comedy, both to local and international audiences, is of particular interest to us here as we explore how he has built this trust in his creations. His success in securing international funding and support with HBO and the BBC via his artistic input and co-production with Princess Pictures (Knox, 2009) has arguably helped subsequent Australian artists like Josh Thomas go on to do similar production and distribution deals in recent years (Lallo, 2013). In addition to maintaining writing, producing and acting control, we suggest his targeted use of original music has also built this following for his work.

**Exploring television theme tunes**

We have already outlined how Lilley’s comedic storytelling has foregrounded musical set pieces with specific performed pieces by individual characters. Now we
wish to focus on the development of his televisual theme tunes, noting a sonic similarity in their composition and orchestration that draws on largely ascending, arpeggiated, medium-paced non-lyrical melodies. As well, there is a marked visual similarity with the visual titles of each series, characterised by slow motion, out of focus tracking shots that introduce the world of each new series. We suggest that when considered as part of Lilley’s collected works, these individual theme tunes\textsuperscript{37} and opening sequences create a metanarrative and form of branding across Lilley’s output so far.

We will focus specifically on the theme tunes Lilley has written for four of his five television series to date\textsuperscript{38}, noting their similar styles and ideological approaches. This is despite each series dealing with quite distinct subject matter – as indicted by their titles and settings, over time Lilley has chosen either individual characters or situations on which to structure his comedy. We explore why Lilley has chosen to sonically brand his projects in this way. Analysis of Lilley’s themes will connect with existing screen sound theory on theme music (Neumeyer, Buhler and Deemer, 2009; Kassabian, 2001) to consider how television themes differ in functionality from big screen film themes.

Specifically we will examine whether themes used across whole television series function as leitmotifs to unify and engage audiences. Unlike most films\textsuperscript{39}, television series take place over multiple episodes and numerous years, and, as such, require a sense of flow to be developed across these. Stillwell (2011) notes how there are rarely traditional character leitmotifs in television sound, largely due to cost and the fragmentary nature of the form. When they are there “they usually serve as some sort of identifier, such as a fragment or development of the theme music, or an atmospheric cue that gives a sense of mood, location or ambience” (123). Moving away from purely character-based leitmotifs, we argue that considering the theme music itself as leitmotif allows for connecting narratives, connecting the experience of the audience, and in a sense branding the work of particular artists.

Television sound has yet to enjoy the sustained analysis and theoretical grounding of its filmic cousin. More specifically, writing focused on the television theme song, the most represented area of television sound, is still relatively scarce. While the area received detailed analysis in Tagg’s 1979 dissertation and eventual publication (2000), little scholarship has evolved around this. Tagg identified three basic functions of theme music in television, what he deemed the reveille function, preparatory function and the mnemonic identification function. Essentially these translated to attracting the attention of viewers, preparing them emotionally for what would follow (and any generic conventions one might expect), and finally, providing a memorable musical signature for the television program/series (2000: 93-96). As we will see below, these functions remain the essential feature of television themes, and are used by Lilley to brand his televisual works and prepare audiences for the content that follows. Further scholarship into television themes has included Hicks’ (1992) study which classified 20 television theme tunes into four categories based solely on lyrical content and excluded any musical consideration. The lack of musical focus makes it extremely limited in its

\textsuperscript{37} Note that while Bryony Marks was responsible for the music in the first series, and John Foreman for the last two, Lilley himself composed all theme tunes (and many of the ‘set pieces’) in the series’.

\textsuperscript{38} The analysis does not cover Jonah From Tonga where Lilley has composed a deliberately Tongan sounding theme, and used Tongan words (albeit very few of them) in it. This marks a departure from the pattern we highlight here, although ‘Tongan-ness’ aside, there are still some musical similarities.

\textsuperscript{39} The caveat here is obviously films that are part of a trilogy or longer sequence of narrative, for example The Lord of the Rings trilogy or the Harry Potter films.
applicability. James Deaville’s own contribution to his 2011 anthology on television sound provides an exhaustive history on writings in and around television sound. More detailed analysis of both historical and current phenomena can be found in Rodman’s (2010) study, along with Donnelly and Hayward’s (2013) recent anthology. The latter includes a chapter from David Butler that references the concept of leitmotifs, and themes more broadly in television, as well as debate on the relationship between television music and film music.40

Butler (2013), in following an earlier caution from Donnelly (2002) that television music “should not be analysed as if it were film music” (332), argues that, while “sharing some approaches to the scoring of narrative fictions, television music and film music are not the same and to expect them to operate in similar ways is to ignore the specific nature of each medium and the manner in which its audiences primarily access it” (Butler, 2013: 164). Where Donnelly had been focused on the technical differences between the two sonic forms – which may not still apply given advances in television broadcasting and playback fidelity – Butler highlights the different viewing conditions between television and film, arguing that television sound is largely about trying to capture and sustain the attention of the audience. But not all televisual sound is doing that alone, and by considering the larger filmic arc of leitmotivic sound in television we can highlight nuances that connect series together.

Title music sequences, or theme tunes, have long been an integral part of the soundtrack for films. As Buhler, Neumeyer and Deemer argue, theme tunes act as a crucial buffer between the outside world and the diegetic world of the film (2010: 165). Not only is music essential to this “framing” but also to the establishment of such things as mood, genre, geography, pacing and the like.41 While theme tunes may have become more complicated with cinema in recent years, given the common predilection for launching straight into the narrative and holding main titles and credits to further into the film (or only at the end) (see Neumeyer and Buhler, 2009), we would argue that television has continued to rely on the framing and announcing function that theme tunes afford.

Theme tunes are key parts of television programming. As Tagg (2000) highlighted, theme tunes function as key identifiers for the program, in the first instance indicating the genre of what is to come. For example, upbeat slap bass motifs indicated comedy in the case of Seinfeld; the iconic BBC Stereophonic workshop created Science Fiction sonically in the case of 1960s Doctor Who; the sound of nursery-rhyme-like melodies and performances for Sesame Street let us know that a children’s program is coming. Theme tunes can also indicate new forms of televisual storytelling - for example, when iconic film composer John Williams composed a special score called “The Mission” for NBC nightly news, arguably we were told with this one piece of programming strategy that televised journalism was moving from straight reporting and into showbiz-inspired infotainment.42

Further to this, theme tunes can also indicate a program’s narrative and provide summative prologues for viewers, so despite the repetitive nature of programming,

40 We note here that there is much more to say about the similarities and differences between television and film music, particularly in terms of comedy as a genre and a mode of address, but this is beyond the scope of this article.
41 The exception to this are films that eschew non-diegetic music altogether, such as the Dogma 95 films.
42 It could be said that many viewers now engage with television in different ways, including watching programming on demand, in binge batches and in online segments, however it’s fair to assume that those that still watch news programming would still be engaged in this traditional way given the time-sensitive nature of this type of content delivery and its relationship to network ratings and prime time expectations.
new viewers are always familiar with the narrative. Often this function is performed lyrically as per the theme tune to *The Nanny, Gilligan's Island* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (which each lyrically tell the ‘story so far’ of the show’s main characters and their contexts). Donnelly notes that The Who’s song ‘Who Are You’, used as the theme tune for *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, becomes “a reference to the narrative’s search” in contemporary drama (2005: 145–6). One might also posit its use to attract the attention of a targeted demographic for the program, namely former fans of The Who that now represent the middle-aged, middle-class dominant television viewing audience.

Theme tunes have an important role in announcing their product. When we hear a show’s theme tune, the ‘flow’ of normal programming (as Raymond Williams famously said of television, 1974: 78-118), is disrupted. Even where programs are consumed as part of DVD box sets or binge release via online systems like Netflix, most often theme tunes remain either as DVD homepage soundtracks or as episode markers. With the theme tune, the viewer is given an aural cue to direct their full attention to the screen. That is, of course, assuming the program and the theme tune interest that viewer. As Donnelly writes in a rare account of television theme tunes and their function: “Title themes provide product differentiation within a crowded arena of competing television programmes. They provide essential branding, providing audiences with instant recognition of the forthcoming programming” (2005: 145).

In film sound studies, the leitmotif “connotes a concise, recurring musical statement associated with a non-musical object or idea” (Link, 2009: 180). Most often these musical statements are linked to key characters, objects, concepts or places within the diegesis. Commonly recognized examples of this exist in movies like *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), the *Harry Potter* series and so on. The repetition of the necessarily recognisable leitmotif becomes essential in alerting the viewer to a narrative event (even an ephemeral presence such as ‘The Force’ in the *Star Wars* films). Indeed Butler (2013) points out that “The core function of a leitmotif is to guide the listener through the narrative ... [and as such] will seldom remain the same throughout the drama but will transform in structure, key, instrumentation and so on in relation to the unfolding narrative” (168). Thus in television music, leitmotifs rarely get the chance to evolve with the narrative due to the shorter lengths of television programs, and more often are ‘themes’ that connect to characters but stay the same throughout the program (Ibid.) By extension, however, the heralding function, repetition and evolution of leitmotifs fits neatly with the operation of television theme tunes as they occur over different series, connected either by the premise of the show (eg *Doctor Who*) or the creator (eg Chris Lilley). For the purposes of the present study then, Chris Lilley has developed a type of theme at the beginning of each episode that both alerts the viewer to its commencement and immerses then in a familiar (and presumably positive) understanding of what is to unfold. The evolution of the sound of the leitmotif echoes developments in artistic intent, subject matter and, as we will see with Lilley’s work, production value. Further evidence of the leitmotific function can be observed in the short grabs of television theme tunes commonly used at the beginning and end of breaks for commercial television – an overt sonic cue to the viewer to reconnect with the diegesis of the television world.

While this basic repetition is somewhat straight forward, Link usefully notes that “Television’s static motivic framework can become a powerful force in creating a stable tone or identity of perhaps more importance to the continuing nature of television than to the ostensible single-event film” (Link, 2009: 186). Furthermore,
we would contest that leitmotifs can actually travel across and through televisual series, an idea that this been used in television usually to describe discrete characterization, as for example, Mills’ analysis of the character of Angel in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (2011: 182-4), or the development of Rose’s theme in the *Doctor Who* (Butler, 2013: 167-174).

Here we want to explore this further by suggesting that there is a recognizable leitmotif for the comedic series’ of Chris Lilley generally, rather than to indicate specific characters or settings. For this to be the case, the diversity of leitmotif construction must be acknowledged. The filmic examples cited above are largely concerned with leitmotifs constructed via melodic devices. Link has demonstrated how various musical devices can demarcate a leitmotif, he notes that “the leitmotif’s flexibility … lies in the fact that any musical parameter might become its identifying feature” (Link, 2009: 185).

As the analysis below will demonstrate, for Chris Lilley’s theme tunes, it is largely textual devices that work to unite his work and connect viewers through the various series as well as within them by connecting specific characters, situations, etc. The subtle alterations and developments between theme tunes, seen in the light of leitmotif functioning, allow Lilley to connect and ‘knowingly wink’ at his audience even prior to the commencement of the diegesis of different programs, as well as just with different episodes of the same program. As in filmic leitmotifs, the development of the themes alerts viewers to narrative changes within each of the series.

**Chris Lilley’s theme tunes, and across series comedic leitmotifs**

Lilley’s first three programs, *We Can Be Heroes*, *Summer Heights High* and *Angry Boys* all utilise theme tunes that he composed, and they are all similar in terms of sonic approach. While each operates to communicate (humorously) about its diegetic world, Lilley also draws on textual devices to connect the three of them.

![Title screens from Chris Lilley's first three series](image)

Figure 3: Title screens from Chris Lilley’s first three series

As can be seen above, the series are connected visually through their opening title screens. As noted above, the first series *We Can Be Heroes: Finding the Australian of the Year*43, ‘documents’ five fictional characters (all played by Lilley) in their quest to become Australian of the Year. The title card appears over clouds parting to reveal some blue sky, neatly referencing the aspirational and inspirational qualities of the candidates. The title font enforces the possibility of serious documentary, with the gold colouring, shading and capitals all typical of a documentary genuinely exploring this topic.

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43 Also known as *The Nominees* in the UK and USA.
Summer Heights High continues the sky theme, as a fake sun rises over the fictional Summer Heights High School. Summer Heights High documents the life of three members of the school; the self-appointed ‘Director of Performing Arts’, teacher Mr G, Tongan student Jonah Takalua, and former private school student Ja’ime King, who viewers first met as a candidate for Australian of the Year in the first series, who is on exchange to the public Summer Heights High School. The lack of capitalisation, colourful shading and angled presentation give more than a clue to the comedic bent of the series, somewhat fittingly given viewers are now aware of Lilley’s style, and indeed of one of the main characters.

Finally, Angry Boys dispenses with the sunshine, instead announcing its imposing credits over cloudy skies, firmly placed on the horizon. As implied by the title, Angry Boys explores the tensions, traumas and troubles faced by young males growing up in the 21st Century. As with previous series, Lilley plays a range of characters, from an American rapper S.mouse to Ruth ‘Gran’ Sims, a 65-year-old grandmother and prison officer at the Sydney Garingal Juvenile Justice Centre for teenage boys.

The musical similarities between the three theme tunes are immediately striking. In all, Lilley has adopted a choral melodic motif, largely involving wordless vocables, albeit with small differences. The first in the corpus, We Can Be Heroes, has a scruffy, ‘under-produced’ choral melody. It is also introduced through didjeridu accompaniment a nudge towards a particularly clichéd type of Australian representation (a particular type of ABC-documentary- an Australian Story type), coupled with the ultimate bland representation of Australianness, the repetition of the word ‘gday’. Combined with the choral melody it provides an ironic sense of gravitas, and this builds throughout the course of the series, as regular viewers of such programs come to understand. With the repetition of the leitmotif, the repeated theme tune, audiences come to associate this theme with Lilley’s comedic approach and the overall suggestion of irony.

Lilley continues the choral motif into Summer Heights High. Cleverly he alters the relaxed slang of the choral melody for an expertly executed, overly articulated choral performance. Clearly implied in this is the choral dexterity of a highly performing school choir, where, despite the absence of any words, emphasis is placed on every syllable and accent. Not only does the melodic textural musical device connect the series to his earlier work, it also helps set the scene for the high school world of the series, simultaneously providing a humorous comment on the ‘perfection’ of the school choir, especially in light of lead character Ja’ime’s disdain for authority and propriety.

Angry Boys, once again calls on the wordless vocables of a choir to announce its leitmotif. Again, textually the connection to previous series is clear. The textural leitmotif works to draw together the audiences of the different series and potentially expand the audience base. It also ensures there is a degree of cultural capital in understanding the full corpus of Lilley’s work. Once again with this leitmotif, Lilley develops it to suit his narrative and comedic intents. Here the choir is exclusively male and young (to suit the subject matter). The melodic contour is also developed and involves more intervallic movement than either of the previous themes. This serves to add a certain degree of aggression and punch to the semantically absent vocables. The aggression is furthered through an increase in tempo from the previous two themes and a shouty, rough texture from the voices. Again, the direct connection to young teenage and pre-teenage boys is well made, as is their ‘angry’ nature.
Lilley himself acknowledges his humorous intent, but views the development of the leitmotifs more in financial terms. As he explained in an interview to promote the soundtrack release for the music from Angry Boys, his process when writing music for each series began out of necessity, and has gradually developed as his budgets and skills have grown:

*I think initially I wanted to just have a really funny program, but packaged together as this really serious documentary ... It was like the composer for the fake documentary didn’t get the joke, so they took it all a bit seriously. And the funny thing is that the budget’s gone up with each show, so the first time with We Can Be Heroes it was a Marimba and a couple of percussion instruments and stuff, and then we brought in a string section for Summer Heights High to make it bigger, and then there was this massive orchestra for Angry Boys, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and it was like ‘let’s just go crazy’.* (Lilley in Giuffre, 2011: 26)

There are two things particularly notable in Lilley’s remarks: the first concerns the growing sonic quality exhibited throughout Lilley’s catalogue, and the second revolves around his positioning of genre. Kevin Donnelly (2013: 114) notes that “high quality music can misdirect away from other shortcomings of television programs and films ... Music can be one of the most palpable signifiers of superior production values in audiovisual culture” (2013: 114). The incorporation of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to perform Lilley’s playful theme clearly demarcates the series as more professional and superior to the previous series. However, reviews for Angry Boys indicate that this misdirection – the assumption of quality – did not fool the audience. Angry Boys was then the worst received of Lilley’s corpus, despite the growing production values. To be fair, critical reviews were mixed, some hailing Lilley for his ability to push the boundaries of ‘risky’ comedy and social commentary, while others noted the series just was not funny enough. Ultimately the viewers voted and from a peak of 1.4 million viewers for the highly anticipated opening episode, the ratings fell dramatically to a low of 391 000 for episode 9 and 612 000 for the finale.

Lilley uses the term “fake documentary” to try and explain the genre positioning of We Can Be Heroes and subsequent series. Interestingly he does not use the term ‘mockumentary’ to describe his work, possibly because it is a word for critics and not creators? Or could it be that he trying to achieve something else, something more in between genres? Rodman (2011: 35) notes that American audiences can usually identify television genres easily. Moving on to music specifically he notes: “Music on television is perceived much like television genre in that composers tend to produce music for television narratives in certain styles of music that connect easily with the viewers’ expectations of genre conventions” (Ibid.). From Lilley’s own admission above, he has tried to execute the theme tune in such a way that people would associate it with ‘serious documentary’, further complicating the audience’s reading of his program. This was especially the case in We Can Be Heroes where the audience were yet to understand Lilley’s character based parody, and its straight-laced presentation. Thus the supposedly ‘serious’ theme tune points to the ambiguity in Lilley’s work – there is clear satirical, political comment there as well as comedy. And so even after the ruse is up by the second series, Lilley maintains

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the documentary sound of his theme, albeit nuanced for each new situation, in order to allow the critical comment to continue. In this way he allows the theme tune to serve multiple aims, similar in part to John Williams’ various (albeit non-critical) inclusions to the underscore in *Lost in Space*. As Rodman as observed: “*Lost in Space* was a sort of genre hybrid between SF drama, soap opera serial, and kid’s adventure show. Williams’s music served all three of these sub-genres well, through the musical functions of monumentalizing, profundity and hyperbole” (2013: 49). While profundity and hyperbole are clearly present (especially by the time we get to *Angry Boys*), Lilley’s themes also allow for a knowing wink to the audience, to remind them that all is not how it seems, or sounds.

This knowing wink is perhaps nowhere as pronounced as the title theme to *Ja’ime: Private School Girl*. Here Lilley has the orchestra in full flight, with sweeping glissandi and cymbal crashes used to make sure we don’t miss the point. The theme is announced via a thumping quaver bass motif, adding urgency to previous Lilley themes and ensuring immediate anticipation is felt. The full choir returns here to sing the (wordless) theme, with female voices now dominating as we watch scenes of Ja’ime preparing for school. Audiovisually there is far greater synchronisation with this theme. We see Ja’ime play the flute melody as it takes over in the orchestration, and a squeeze of perfume from Ja’ime’s atomiser, with attendant shimmer sound, begins the four bar harmonic transition to the dominant seventh. The key change sees the full introduction and power of the orchestra, with brass doubling the choral melody as Ja’ime, her mother and under sister (in that order) descend the spiral staircase. This theme is all about Ja’ime, whether she is conducting the orchestra from the flute in her bedroom, or timing her ‘awards-style’ decent, we cannot miss the star of the show. The huge texture matches the huge personality and prepares the audience to reunite with one of their favourite Lilley characters. Once again, from the wordless, choral melody to the heavy use of arpeggiated figures to the neat perfect cadence resolution on the title card, this is a theme Lilley fans recognise. It is a theme that reconnects them with Lilley’s corpus of work, and screams ‘look out, Ja’ime is back!’

Theme signatures and comedy

Sonically, Lilley’s themes are similar, but they also help to brand his creations and tie them together. Like the models we argue above, these theme tunes can be considered ways to set the tone of the program, perhaps indicate its narrative, or even make a political comment. Of course, as comedies, it’s important to consider the potential for comedic effect that these provide, as the model of theme tune analysis and comedy proposed by Phil Tagg in his iconic screen sound project, *Ten Little Title Tunes* (2003), shows.

One of Tagg’s ‘tunes’ is an examination of audience responses to Monty Python’s theme tune, “Liberty Bell”. In addition to an extremely detailed analysis of the tune from a variety of angles, notes it relationship to humour:

> It should also come as no surprise that Python beat all other tunes hands down in three-digit HUMOUR category 107 [a reference to Tagg’s internal system of categorisation]. One possible reason may be that the tune contains something which might itself have been a humorous novelty feature when the march first appeared in 1893. We are referring here to the lone tubular bell note (the c5 in bar 4), struck as upbeat to the main part of the piece, and to the naively anaphonic way it stylises the sound of any bell
rather than the weighty historical and ideological significance of the Liberty Bell itself. Another reason may be that the high number of recognitions the example received indicates that it was directly linked with the Monty Python series by many respondents, possibly also that several of those who did not mention the series by name had nevertheless experienced the music as belonging to something humorous on TV. (Tagg, 2003; 413-14)

Tagg points here to several connections between humour and the theme tune in this example. Firstly, he identifies the musical joke via the ‘novelty sound’ of the bell, but also the associated joke (articulated here when he suggests that some audiences laughed because they recognised the song ‘as belonging to something humorous’, even if it was not humorous in and of itself). This latter point is particularly important for Lilley as he develops a consistent sonic marker from We Can Be Heroes to Summer Heights High, Angry Boys and Ja’ime. There is nothing notably comedic about the theme tunes themselves. Yet he is expecting audiences to make the association, to sense the parody and social comment that will follow, and, by using similar textural devices throughout his theme tunes he is expecting the flow of the joke to continue for each subsequent series. He is also using subtle textural changes to make sure the audience knows the work has a new focus, whether it be an individual character or a group of characters.

Conclusion

There is still much analysis and historical research to be done around the sound of television. Recent developments in narratives around ‘serious television’, including the often touted production values of HBO series for instance (DeFino, 2013), mean that greater attention will flow to this previously neglected audiovisual form. Yet it is not because television now looks or sounds like film that we should apply existing tropes and tools from film sound analysis to consider it. Rather it is because there is still real value in some of the analytical frameworks we use in film sound analysis being applied to television, albeit adapted to suit context. One such concept is the leitmotif.

This article has argued that television theme tunes, when applied over multiple series, can act as a leitmotif for the creator. The themes are repetitive, they provide narrative guidance to the audience, and they clearly announce or signpost what is about to happen. Thus even in a traditional sense they operate as we would imagine any leitmotif to function. Applied to the first four series by Australian character comedian Chris Lilley, we have seen how they communicate to his fan-base, connect characters, set us up for the parody and comedy that will follow, and prepare us for some, at times, harsh social commentary. For example, there is a stark difference between the apparently saccharine sonic introductions, characterised by breathy and elongated slow ascending melodies, and the show’s content that includes storylines around bullying, race and class relations and exclusions, and at times extremely ugly egotistical characters.

Across all four theme tunes there is a textural sameness in the vocable melodies, the growing orchestration, the neat resolutions and the connection to main characters. Neil Lerner discusses throughout his essay on the sound of the Star Trek television series over the decades it ran, the “remarkable homogeneity” (2013: 69) in the music. The same could be said for Lilley’s early work, though his body of work is much shorter than Star Trek! Whether this leitmotivic aspect will become
detrimental remains to be seen and, as noted above, Lilley’s last series, *Jonah From Tonga*, did depart from the formula to attempt a Tongan sounding theme. Curiously, the series was a ratings disaster for Lilley and his backers the ABC and HBO. While we are not suggesting the series failed because the leitmotif changed, it will be interesting to see what Lilley comes up with next, and whether he continues to sonically brand his corpus of work together.

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Princess Pictures (nd), accessed 28/10/15.


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PICTURING SOUND  
An Interview with Screen Composer Graeme Perkins

Henry Johnson

Abstract

Graeme Perkins is an eclectic musician. Based for much of his career in Dunedin in the south of the South Island of New Zealand, and working as a freelance performer, arranger, composer and director, Perkins spent several decades composing documentary film music amongst other television and film music work. This interview article highlights his compositional activities through his own voice in order to reveal information about his background in music, his introduction to working with film music, compositional techniques and style, equipment and musical identity. Each of these themes is explored as a way of providing information about Perkins’ creative processes when producing sound for screen, and to reveal some of the musical and social dynamics that are a part of the collaborative process of producing screen sound more broadly.

Keywords

Documentary film, film music, Graeme Perkins, New Zealand, Dunedin sound

Introduction

This is the third of several interview articles on Dunedin-based documentary film composers. From the 1980s to the 2000s, three particularly influential and prolific screen composers were employed by Natural History New Zealand (NHNZ) to work on documentary films, which were often produced for major international broadcasters, including Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, National Geographic Channel and NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). Formerly called the Natural History Unit of Television New Zealand (TVNZ) and established in 1977, between 1997 and 2012 it was a subsidiary of Fox International Channels. NHNZ is currently owned by David Haslingden, a former Fox executive.

The purpose of this article is to further celebrate the compositional activities of Dunedin-based documentary film composers and to highlight through

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46 The research process for this article was undertaken with the approval of the University of Otago Ethics Committee. The interview with the composer took place in December 2012 and has been edited by the author and checked for style and accuracy by the interviewee.
their own voices some of the creative and social processes that are a feature of working in film music in New Zealand, especially in the south of the South Island. Building on my previous two interview articles with Trevor Colman and Neville Copland (Johnson 2010; 2012), this particular article includes a major interview with screen composer Graeme Perkins. My aim in undertaking the interview was to allow the composer to talk about his background in music, his introduction to working with film music, compositional techniques and style, equipment and musical identity. Each of these themes was explored as a way of providing information about Perkins’ creative activities with film music, and reveal his processes for working with film creatively through screen sound and in terms of the social dynamics that are a part of the collaborative process of making a film more broadly.

Graeme Perkins has had an eclectic career in music. Following undergraduate study at the University of Otago in New Zealand, he undertook studies in composition, arranging and film scoring at the Dick Grove School of Music in Los Angeles [run by Dick Grove, (1927-1998)], and at Berklee College of Music in Boston in the US. In New Zealand he has worked as musical librarian for the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, and as programme producer for National Radio, both positions being based in Wellington. As a professional keyboardist, Perkins has been a private piano teacher and performed in Copyright, Cripple, Shaman, Smalltalk, In Time, and The Swing of Things. He has been pianist for the Dunedin City Jazz Orchestra, which has made tours of California and Europe. Other creative outputs in music have included arranging for the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra pops concert, and musical director/arranger (and often keyboardist) for an array of productions in and around Dunedin, which was his home for many years, at the Fortune Theatre (including Angry Housewives, Personals, Shakners, Always...Patsy Cline, Making it Big, and Love Off the Shelf), in various Dunedin Operatic musicals, and for children’s TV (including Play School, You And Me, and Tiki-Tiki Forest Gang). Similar work has also included being keyboardist for the Southern Jazz Ensemble and other artists for ‘Jazz Tonight’ recordings for Radio New Zealand. More recently he has worked in a number of shows and bands, including Swing of Things, the Motown Show, Oxo Cubans, Little Winter Cabaret, the Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, and Stars in Your Eyes.

Figure 1: Graeme Perkins in Central Otago, New Zealand (Image courtesy of the composer).
Of particular interest to this article is Perkins’ work in TV and film. He has composed music for numerous commercials and jingles for TV and radio, including National Business Review, New Zealand Lotteries Board, Hollands Honey, Dairy Fresh, and Arthur Barnett. Most significant of his work in film has been as soundtrack composer for Natural History New Zealand (NHNZ) between 1989 and 2009, when he produced over 200 music soundtracks, among them Masters of Inner Space, Emperors of Antarctica, Animal Cannibals, Chile: Land of Extremes, The Lost Whales, A Wild Moose Chase, Twisted Tales, Tibet: Wheel of Life, Winds of Change, Deep Blue, The Devil's Playground, Ice Worlds, Ghosts of Gondwana, Aleutians: Cradle of the Storms, The Most Extreme, Curse of the Elephant Man, The Jonathon Lemalu Story (for TVNZ), New Zealand Movie Paradise, The Great Wall of China, Deer Wars (for TVNZ), and Expedition Antarctica (see further IMDb 2014; NHNZ 2014; The Film Archive 2014). His creative work in this field resulted in Best Original Music (Television) in 1997 for Dragons of Komodo. He applies his experience of composing for film with annual music workshops for Science Communication film students in a course “The Language of Music” at the University of Otago.

Background

Henry Johnson (henceforth HJ): How did you get into music?

Graeme Perkins (henceforth GP): Well I got sent to piano lessons first up when we lived in Invercargill [South Island, New Zealand] and I didn’t get very far with those. I got to about grade four, and when I was fifteen pulled out. But the interesting thing is the minute I pulled out of formal lessons I started playing by ear. I started using the piano as my relaxer, and as a teenager got into playing in bands down there at a very young age, probably about thirteen, fourteen, or even before. Our dads used to drive us to the first gigs we got out in the country.

HJ: What type of bands were they?

GP: Pop bands. This would have been in the late ’60s. When I was at Highschool. We played for weddings; just your normal gigs. Dance music, doing covers. I went to Southland Boys’ High School. We practised hymns and we listened to classical records, and there was zero else because it was a very traditional boys school. So I sort of had no encouragement there apart from playing in our bands on the side, and then went to varsity and thought there was nothing offering in music so I just took history. I took one unit of music along the way and ended up with a Post-Grad in History.

HJ: This would be in the early ’70s by now?

GP: Yeah, we’re in the early ’70s and there was still nothing going. There was no contemporary music course at all, and the straight music offering at varsity was very conservative and didn’t suit me at all really. So anyway, I graduated out of that and then immediately thought I still love music. I thought what can you do with history, just teach or whatever. I knew I didn’t want to, so I just climbed straight back into bands and started playing

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47 On Natural History New Zealand, see their website at www.nhnz.tv
around Dunedin. I started teaching piano and guitar at the same time. I felt as though I was good enough to turn around and start teaching, even though I didn’t have any letters or anything. Back at high school I played guitar, but I’d come on to keys. I bought a Fender Rhodes piano and a Fender Twin Reverb [amplifier] to match and off we went with that.

I played in quite a few bands during the last year of varsity and the next two years. I was very interested in jazz and arranging in particular. I knew that I didn’t know enough and didn’t know quite where I could get that knowledge. I remember going up and seeing Calder Prescott [Dunedin-based jazz musician] and was fascinated by what he could do and what he knew, but I still wasn’t quite sure that I wanted to be doing that so I thought, okay, I’ll take myself overseas. So I went to the States and by this time we’re in 1976 and I just sort of went over there. I didn’t even know where I was going and I went to Los Angeles first and I found a fantastic course, The Dick Grove School of Music in Los Angeles and it was run in Studio City [neighborhood] just over the hill from Hollywood. It was like a night school and a weekend school, but the whole thing was run by people who worked in Hollywood. It was amazing and I just thought, oh my god this is good you know. So I’d saved as much as I could beforehand ‘cause I didn’t have a scholarship or anything and I took every course I could possibly get at that place. I was just going nights through the week and weekends and I took things like film scoring, arranging and jazz improv and everything, choral arranging, lyric writing, and then we had masterclasses in arranging where absolute big wheels would come in and talk to us. I lasted there for about half the year before the money ran out.

HJ: What are your musical influences?

GP: I never quite saw myself into one bag. Not really classical; I didn’t listen to classical much. I didn’t like it that much, but oddly enough what I was to do in the soundtrack world ended up being in the classical bag you would say.

HJ: What was your first step into film music?

GP: Prior to going to the States I didn’t really have any desire to step into film. I was more interested in playing and being in bands, and I was very interested in arranging, the whole concept of writing at that stage. Just the monkish art of writing orchestrations for musicians and handing it to them and then wait for the incredible surprise of what you’re about to hear, whether you got it right or not. I was much more into that than film scoring at that stage I guess. It sounded interesting, but it was sort of a little to the side. I had no great sort of desire at that stage.

Over the years looking back, I think a lot of the reasons I had a lot of work was because I could turn my hand to different styles, different genres. I never really felt I was an absolute master of any of them. I was masterful at turning to different situations and demands, and particularly in the soundtrack writing because what we ended up doing at NHNZ were a lot of different styles. I think the reason I ended up getting an awful lot of work was I could do an ethnic style if they wanted, or I could do an historic sort of sounding piece, or I could give you a feel from the ’50s, or I could do a jazz piece.
Then I had enough money to throw myself into the Summer School at Berklee College of Music in Boston. So I went across there and threw myself in there to studies as well. It was good in that they had the facilities, but it wasn’t so good in that you weren’t taught by people who were working in the field during the day. You were being taught by teachers and for me just coming straight from the Dick Grove School of Music in Hollywood, that was quite a difference. But they had great facilities and practise rooms and huge libraries. Then I came back [to New Zealand] after that.

HJ: And then set up in Dunedin?

GP: Well just trying to break in somewhere and find a job as such that was more in music than I’d experienced before. I ended up getting a job with the NZSO [New Zealand Symphony Orchestra] as a Music Librarian in Wellington [North Island]. We were in the Library on the Terrace [street], but the great thing was the NZSO practised in the room next door. It was like a big recording studio in the old building on the Terrace. There were three of us in the Music Library and we compiled music not just for the NZSO, but for regional orchestras too. We were sort of like the Library of classical music.

HJ: There’s a certain irony in that, isn’t there?

GP: I know there is, yeah. Here in the area I don’t have much interest in, but at least it was a nine-to-five, you know.

And then I moved from there. A job came up. It sort of grew to be a bit boring. Another job came up in National Radio. It was just along the road and so I moved along there and became a programme producer at National Radio, but that only lasted about six months. It was great job again, but it was really just assembling programmes for airing on National Radio and back then in what was about, what are we now, ’77 or ’78, National Radio was very conservative. You’d be playing the Percy Faith Orchestra or [laughs], you know what I mean?

At that point, I was married to Yvonne and we decided to just come back to Dunedin and come full circle. We had our first little boy born and we wanted to be back with friends and people so we came back. First of all I came back and it was just the same old place and I went labouring on a building site and then I went truck driving. But then I very quickly got back into bands. Started playing in bands and started getting involved in shows, writing arrangements, which I really enjoyed, and I got quite a bit of work in the Fortune Theatre so we did those music shows. And just eked along like that for a few years into the ’80s, so just sort of always thinking gee it could be better. That’s pretty much what I was doing, playing. We were doing a lot of playing then and working in bands. There was work six nights a week. It was amazing back then, the bands. Just pub work and stuff like that, and pop bands and playing private dos. There was a huge amount and you could live off it easily.

The other thing that was going on then was New Zealand’s National Radio programme and it recorded a lot of jazz music in what is now the University [of Otago] music studio. I did a lot, directed and arranged for a lot of programmes, which went to the show Jazz Tonight, where jazz bands all around the country were recorded and put on this show and there was a
good income out of that as well so I did over a dozen of those half-hour shows. I formed a couple of big bands as well and even though I was an absolute novice at writing jazz for big bands I seemed to pull it off and I used that opportunity to write my own music for those big bands.

Screen Composition

HJ: When did you first experience writing for film?

GP: That was, we’re up to about the mid ’80s. In 1986 I got a call from TV because I was doing music direction at the Fortune [Theatre, in Dunedin]. Would I come in and direct a series of shows to be called Let’s Sing Out, which was like a semi-religious series to feature local singers and to be televised? I thought yeah that sounds great so I did that. So that was my first look into television. It was arranging for the backings for the bands for a start. And there was a core of about eight singers so I’d arrange all the vocals for those and so I arranged all of the music although they were all covers in this case. I wrote the theme and we went in and did that show. Shortly after that an ad came in the paper. They wanted Music Directors for Play School, a children’s programme based on the original UK version.

HJ: You did a lot on that didn’t you?

GP: I did. I wasn’t at all interested and friends and family pushed me. They said go on give it a go. At least find out about it, and so I applied for it and asked what the conditions were and everything and they sent out how much you’d be paid and it was like mega bucks compared to what I had been earning. And you only worked half the week for it you know. Yeah, you could do what you liked for the rest of the time, which I did. So I went for it like a rat down a hole because the money was so darn good. Not that I had any burning desire to do children’s music and as it turned out I got it and Neville [Copland] and I got the jobs as Music Directors because there were two teams working and we did that for two years and as it turned out I thoroughly enjoyed it.

In ’89, the very early stages of NHNZ were being formed. I think it was still under the umbrella of TVNZ. They had a very small staff then and that one was called What Next and that was my very first soundtrack and I hustled round and bought and begged and borrowed gear and set it up in my room. I had not very much in the way of recording gear so in the late ’80s there was an absolute explosion of me trying to accumulate recording gear.

Compositional techniques and style

HJ: Tell me about the process of writing music for What’s Next?

GP: My memory is pretty blurry about the first little bit. I remember I did it, but the actual to-and-fros I can’t remember. I think I went out and bought myself a Fostex desk and a matching eight-track machine. Whether I did that just on the spot or whether I had just set it up prior because I knew this was opening up, I’m not sure. I can’t remember the details. When they had some
roughts put together on film you would sit down and view it and just decide. They would still be editing, of course, but down to a certain reasonable length you would sit down and they would have a very clear idea of where they would like music go in it. They would say, well I would like some music here. It was usually at the front and then maybe there’s a bit of a dramatic scene coming here so I’d like some here. The whole way through I would madly take notes as they talked about it and I got pretty good at asking the questions I needed to know. I’m speaking generally now because this is the general process of it. You would have a session together where they would show you their film, usually still too long, and you would talk through and as I gained more experience and became more on the scene they would say what do you think. Do you think we should have music here and it was more a two way thing. I would madly take notes and time codes off the thing and we’d get through and they would go away and I would come up with some demos I would use. I would say well why don’t I do a demo of maybe the opening and maybe this sequence here and maybe this one here because this one’s a bit different, and come up with demos and invite them back and say okay here’s what I’ve come up with and run the music against the film and see what they thought. It would be usual for them to tip it a certain way, you know, I really like that but I’m not so keen on that, or hey this is making me feel worried rather than tense. You’d get into very subtle emotions, which is interesting in itself because you can play one piece of music to someone and they will feel melancholic. The other person will just feel slightly blue.

HJ: Did the directors ever say we don’t want this, we want something else.

GP: Oh yes, sometimes they say no, or often it would be me. I’d got the wrong end, not often, but sometimes I would get the wrong end of the stick. I would have picked them up wrong. As the years rolled through and I did many hundreds of hours of soundtracks, you got real good at asking the right questions at those director meetings. Each director is totally different. Some directors are self declared musical morons where they are relying on you heavily and so they want you to provide; they want help. They need help but I just don’t let that go because they still will react to what you have written so it’s still a process of trying to know what they want to feel. So regardless, they might say to me look you’re the muso, you know. You’re the one, you know better than me. No, that’s scary territory because I’ve had that happen and then they come back and they go, oh no, because they do have more to say. They’ve been in the field with this damn film, up to their ears in some swamp filming natural history, and this is precious to them. Musicians come along at the eleventh hour and can make or break it literally by what you do with it and so it’s very important to get in their head. Some of the best experiences I had were with the guy Rod Morris [director and producer]. He would tell you himself he has very little musical knowledge or understanding, but he would bring you into the process way early. Like he would ring me up and say look I’m doing this film. I haven’t actually started it yet, he would say, and it would be on Tasmanian devils or Komodo dragons or something like that. He would have the type of music sussed, he would be so prepared about the angle that he wanted to take with that doco that he would know the music, and he said, I’ve got this CD and I’m going to give it to you. It will be way early, before it had even started and he said I want it, there’s this particular track on it, I just love it and I’m going to shoot this thing with this in mind. So that was fantastic because you were very early on. So you want it to be reflective or try and capture the same mood of that piece yet not
plagiarise the composer at all. I have very good experiences with that and there’re other directors who you get great results in the end with too who are very musical and they’re able to say, look I want some French horns in here and I want this. Very specific, you know.

HJ: Would there be any type of director that you’d prefer to work with?

GP: Well I ended up working, forming good relationships with several of the directors and they would keep coming back to me. We did many films together. There were maybe four or five of them at NHNZ who would just keep coming back to me each time because you had a good rapport with them and they grew to trust that you would bring something to their film. You know, that balance of bringing something yourself to the film yet sort of staying within their big picture for it.

HJ: Would any directors say here’s my film, I’ve got no idea what music I want to go in it or where it should go?

GP: Yeah, that’s one extreme and I know that’s happened to me. I can’t think specifically, but I know that’s happened to me and I don’t like it because you don’t know you’re often wasting your time on a demo.

I do a workshop for budding young directors and so I style it on trying to give them a language of music. If and when they come to being able to hire a composer they have language and the whole workshop is styled on being authoritative about music, and we practise in those workshops just the use of musical language, and I’m not talking about crotchets and minims and stuff like that, but more talking about getting used to describing emotions with music and they practise ordering up music.

HJ: What do you mean by that?

GP: By ordering up what music they want for their film or for segments of their film. They practise the language, they practise how to talk to a composer so that composers gets a good idea of what they want, so as not to waste time and energy. Yeah, come up with a vocab as near as they can to ask them for what they want and the way I do it. They have to suss out a piece of music that might well be used as a soundtrack. They’ve got to find this piece of music. They’ve got to bring it along to the workshop so they get this assignment well ahead and they have to bring it along, but they have to prepare some writing for me so that in the workshop they can say to me, now Mr Composer, I would like you to write me a piece of music and what follows is a description of that piece of music. So then I and everyone else in the group tries to get a picture of what this is that they’re talking about and when everybody’s satisfied, and they can use whatever words they want, and we’ve practised them in the workshop prior to that, to try and describe this piece of music as if they’re asking me to write that piece of music and then we stick it on and we listen to it and everyone goes, oh that’s pretty good, or jeez I wasn’t expecting that, and that gives them a sense of what it’s like for me. I have always seen or have come to see as the essence of that relationship between the composer of film music and the director because that’s the core of a good working relationship.
HJ: When you then work with the director or the producer you’re hoping that that director will have this language.

GP: I am.

HJ: What type of things would you be asking?

GP: I would say, well what do you reckon? It seems to me like this would be nice with an orchestral sound track. What do you think? They might say, that sounds pretty good, I was thinking of that, and you find they actually were. Or you might say, or we could either go the orchestral way with this, or we could go a very sparse way and we could just use lots of sound washes, soundscapes. What do we want here? Do we want to be drawn into it? Do we want to be slapped around the face by it? Do we want it just to sit nicely in the background? I usually ask them to put a scratch narration on so that I can hear where it is and how much it’s talking and all of that.

We did films in Indonesia and I would find myself going into the library and trying to get good samples and soak up how the gamelan music is made. The directors would never want it to be purely ethnic because the audience for most of these films was in the West. So they would often want just moments of pure ethnic composition and structure, but it had to fit the broader style that would be accessible to viewers in the States and Europe.

Equipment

HJ: Can we now turn to technology? Can you give me a bit of the background on the equipment you’ve used over the years and how you use it?

GP: For me, technology was an absolute struggle. I’ve never been hugely technically minded. I leaned heavily on Neville [Copland] as he was very good, younger than me. And I’d always pick his brains, and he was always very helpful, but I started off with a little eight-track Fostex desk and an eight-track quarter-inch reel-to-reel. So I was doing all the early recordings onto that and I would bring home a seven-inch Studer [reel-to-reel]. I would hire it from NHNZ, and I would master onto that. So it was all very tapey.

HJ: How did you get everything lined up? What would you be watching the film on?

GP: I never got it synced up. It was terrible. But I did it because we didn’t sort of have sync. I’d have the time code on. I’d bring home a VHS [video tape]. It would have time code burned in visually. I just got used to lining up some sort of pre-roll. It was real rough. They’d come out home to see the demos and then when everything was ticked off I’d just master onto the Studer.

HJ: So you played the VHS, press play and then press play on your reel to reel.

GP: Yeah, it was that rough. We’re talking about 1989.

HJ: What was the last film you made for NHNZ?
GP: *Expedition Antarctica* for Max Quinn. I was on the Q-base audio on the computer and used QuickTime for film. When we went from VHS to DVD I went onto very early sequences.

HJ: On line?

GP: Oh no, not on line. Oh, totally synced up.

HJ: So how did they give you the movie?

GP: Well, when I did the last one, which was about two or three years ago, it was QuickTime. They just give you QuickTime or you just pulled it off the halfway site. The very last soundtrack I did was a short film for a guy in Wanaka, and yeah, I just downloaded the film. I never even met the guy, I still haven’t to this day. I just found that really strange, yeah. But just fed it back to him.

HJ: Did he have any questions or comments?

GP: No, he just logged it straight off. Towards the last few years at NHNZ it was just becoming a sausage factory really.

HJ: So do they have any full-time composers now?

GP: I don’t believe they do. Neville and I started about the same time in the late ‘80s and we both worked right through the ‘90s. And then Trevor [Coleman] came back from overseas in the 2000s. He started doing a bit and there were all three of us through the 2000s. Neville and I sort of fell away three years ago, and Trevor did a couple more. It’s really thinned out and the last few experiences weren’t like the good old days. For the bulk of it I would get a set time to compose and turn it around. You’ve got to rush through it and drip feed it into the sound suite and the composing time literally vanished towards the end. Pleasure gone, yeah. When I left one of their big series has been done by Plan 9 [Wellington-based composers]. For the bulk of it Neville and I, and then Trevor at the end.

HJ: How would you describe your compositional process? Do you work at the keyboard.

GP: Yeah, pretty much. Right at the beginning of the process I would try to get some themes or motifs going that would serve the whole film and a real feel. A melody or a theme or something; I’d sit at the piano and just really work it out. And then come back to the synth and start pulling in sounds that I might use. Just getting your palette of sounds. I just like the acoustic of the piano. It sort of surrounds you, doesn’t it, and you can immerse yourself in the sound. It’s much more immersive to play the piano than at the synth, which is just really coming out of that speaker.

HJ: If you’re working at the piano and you’ve got the sounds you want, do you then go to the synth?

GP: Yeah.
HJ: What kind of software do you use?

GP: For the bulk of what I did back then I used a lot of modules. Then in later years there were a lot of software sounds as well. I get the themes going then I create a sort of orchestral sound with a leaning towards French horns and woodwinds or something. Then I’d start shopping around in the banks of sounds to see what worked. It would also depend on things like the speed of music or the frequency of it because you can never replace the real players. So you might want violas that attack, a bit of staccato at one stage, and then you might want to be smooth for another, so you might have to choose more than one sound.

HJ: So there’s a lot of classical music coming out in your film scores?

GP: Yeah. I know it’s odd because I’ve really immersed myself in it. I prefer to do big sweeping classical themes.

HJ: This is all working for NHNZ?

GP: I always contracted to them. I always freelanced. One contract after another. You would sign a contract for each film.

Identity

HJ: Do you think any New Zealand influence has come out in your music?

GP: Not necessarily. I don’t think so. That would be up to others to decide really, but I don’t tend to pull on anything like that I don’t think. Quite eclectic and that’s just what the job required really.

HJ: What next from here Graeme?

GP: I’m not sure. It might be the end of my recording for film. It might not be. It doesn’t feel like it is, but I’m enjoying not doing it at the moment and I’m enjoying playing. I’ve stopped sound tracking now for two and a half years and I really have enjoyed the break from it because I did so much for the decades before. I often say that if the phone rang and it was one of those directors that did those wonderful old blue chippers saying look I’ve just scored a real nice film on the Andes, or some adventure at the South Pole or something, saying I’d like you to write the music, I think that would be great, but times have changed you know. The very last series that I did for Animal Planet was the most extreme, which I thoroughly enjoyed. We did one series of thirteen one-hour films, then they ordered up a second, then they ordered up a third, then they ordered up a fourth, then they ordered up a fifth. We ended up doing seventy-seven one hour programmes of the most extreme. Just me. So I’ve pumped out a lot of music you see, which I thoroughly enjoy, but now I feel like I need to rest from it.
Conclusion

This interview has revealed much about the process of composing for documentary film through the voice of Graeme Perkins. As with Trevor Coleman and Neville Copland, Perkins has had an eclectic musical upbringing in the South Island of New Zealand. He pulled out of formal piano lessons as a teenager, yet only to start to play the instrument again by ear. Playing in pop bands was a large component of his teenage life, and such eclecticism in musical tastes has allowed him to pursue a career in music where he has made a living by undertaking a range of jobs.

His visit to the US in 1976 changed the course of his musical career. In the US he took further training in music, especially in composition and film scoring. After his return to New Zealand, it was not long before Perkins had entered the field of screen composing, and, mixed with his other music activities, was working as a professional musician.

In the interview, Perkins has offered insight into his creative compositional processes in writing for film, especially his use of classical sounding music. In the early years, his use of technology was minimal, and his reflection of his younger days of working in this field shows how music was given to film with very limited technological resources. He has also shown some of the social dynamics involved in finding the right music for screen, and especially the collaboration with the director/producer, who may have much influence on the choice of a particular musical style, or in contrast none whatsoever.

After many years of working in documentary film music, Perkins is now moving in a new direction in his long career in music. In the field of film music, the composer has produced an array of works that have contributed to New Zealand documentary film more broadly, and in particular the identity of Dunedin as a hub for such activity over the past three decades.

References

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