

CHAPTER 19

Songs, Soundtracks, and Source Music

If everyone on the movie, from the studio execs all the way down, is in sync and agrees we need a hit song for this movie, then it is a totally great situation because then everyone is shooting for the same goal. But that's never the case and I don't believe that will ever be the case. Even if it is, everyone's vision of what that hit song will be is going to be totally different.

—Jeff Carson

Many films use music besides the instrumental underscore. In addition to the kind of composed score that has been discussed so far, film scores frequently include songs. In musicals, as well as some dramatic films, the actors sing on-camera. Often there is *source music*, music that comes from a source on-screen that the actors can hear—a radio, stereo, live band, or someone singing or playing an instrument. A song can be used in place of instrumental underscore to heighten or comment on the dramatic action. For example, in the last scenes of *Michael Collins*, when Sinéad O'Connor sings, “He Walked Through the Fair,” the picture alternates between Michael Collins driving to what is ultimately his assassination and his fiancée trying on her wedding gown. This creates a poignant bridge between the two characters in their different locations. When the music for a film is mostly, if not completely, comprised of songs instead of underscore, as in *Pulp Fiction*, *Jerry McGuire*, or *The Big Chill*, it is called a *song score*, or *compilation score*.

There are several ways a song can end up in a film. If an established song is used in a new movie, the producer must obtain the right to use it, either in its original form, or by having a new version, or *cover*, recorded. Alternatively, the producer might commission a new song to be written for the film. Of course, if the movie is a musical, then several songs must be commissioned.

The composer's participation in a score that contains songs will vary from project to project. He may be involved in composing the songs, or he may only compose the underscore. For musicals, the songwriter might also write the underscore, as Alan Menken has done for many Disney films. If the songs are used as source music, then the composer is usually not involved, except when they are instrumentals and can be recorded at the same session as the underscore.

Regardless of whether or not the same composer is used for the underscore and the songs, there are always dramatic considerations to keep in mind when choosing or writing songs for a motion picture. Hopefully, the song will enhance the drama in some way, if it is used in place of underscore. But the hard reality of the entertainment business is that there is always a pull-and-tug between creative considerations and those of commerce and profit, and this duality has a large influence on the use of songs in a film. This chapter discusses the many aspects of using songs in movies and the process that lands a song in the film—from the featured songs in musicals to the more subtle and less memorable, but still dramatically important, songs used as source music.

Commissioned Songs

Many times a producer or director wants a song, or songs, to be written specifically for the film. The obvious case for this is a musical, where there are many songs that are essential to the plot. Another possibility is when a producer wants an individual song either for the main title or end credits, or for an important point in the film. Either way, there may be a music supervisor assigned to the project who assists the composer in facilitating the recording of the songs. The director is usually the decision-maker of what music appears in the film, including both songs and underscore. The director (sometimes the producer) is also involved in the process at the approval level, wanting to make sure the songs are appropriate both musically and lyrically.

Once it is determined that a commissioned song is required, a songwriter or songwriting team views a work print of the film. If the song is to be used in a particular scene, they watch that scene over and over.

They then come up with a tune and lyrics that specifically reflect the content of the film. If the composer of the score is also the composer of the song, the thematic material of the song will often be woven into the underscore. The song may use musical material written by the underscore composer (especially if the underscore composer and songwriter are the same person), or it may be a separate musical statement. The song may be used only in the main title or end-credits, or it could be featured as a dramatic statement in the body of the film. "How Do You Keep the Music Playing," from *Best Friends*, is organic to the score of the picture; Michel Legrand uses the theme in his underscore as well as in the song itself. Lyricist Alan Bergman (who writes as a team with his wife, Marilyn) describes the evolution of "How Do You Keep the Music Playing?":

This film has two people involved in a relationship. The woman overcomes the man's resistance to marry, and they go back East to meet their respective families. The visits don't go well, and by the time the honeymoon is over, the marriage is almost over. There is a sequence in which they are on a people-mover in the airport, separated and not talking to each other. It was a marvelous sequence for us [as songwriters] because there are no sound effects or dialogue. Here was an opportunity to find a new way to say, "How do you keep romance alive?"

After viewing the entire film several times, we watched this scene over and over again. Then we said to [composer] Michel Legrand, "What if the first line of the song is 'How do you keep the music playing?'" And he said, "I like that." He wrote the whole melody from that line. We then wrote the rest of the lyrics to that melody.

When writing a new song and tailoring it for a certain movie, writers try to reflect either a single dramatic or emotional moment of the film, or to make a statement about the entire film. In a situation like the one above, it is as close to putting words in the characters' mouths as possible without having them actually sing. This use of a song greatly enhances the story by reflecting exactly what the characters are feeling. In *Up Close and Personal*, the song, "Because You Loved Me," by Diane

Warren was commissioned for that film and used in the end credits. Even though it is not used dramatically in any scenes in the film, the song reflects the feelings of the film's main character, and articulates the emotional thrust of the film.

Sometimes a film maker uses songs containing lyrics that are close to what needs to be expressed, but are not exactly right on. There are many instances where songs are used because the title of the song fits the film, or part of the lyrics fit the film, but the rest does not. A good example of this is *The Big Chill*. This film's opening sequence is a montage where some old college buddies living in different cities find out that one of their old gang has committed suicide. Playing through this montage of several minutes is the original recording of Marvin Gaye singing "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." On the surface, these words fit the scene nicely, for we are seeing all the pals getting the news over the phone. However, these lyrics: "*I bet you're wondering how I knew, 'bout your plans to make me blue ...*" don't really fit the story; they are about a heart-broken guy singing to his girl. The only line that is really relevant is the title line, and this is one reason the song is in the film. Another reason is that it is a song many people know and love, so using it in a film preys upon the audience's familiarity with it—the feeling of nostalgia.

Musicals

Musicals are the ultimate genre where songs are tailored to fit a film. They must be, because the characters are singing them. The words must reflect the story and the music must fit with the overall musical style of the film. The process of writing songs for a musical, whether animated or live action, can be different from that for dramatic-action films. In a dramatic film the songwriters might not be involved until post-production; they probably do not see a script, and develop their ideas from a work print. However, for a musical, the songwriters are involved at an earlier stage. They read the script and discuss with the director where the songs shall go, what the feeling of a song should be, and what the lyric content will be. This is necessary because the songs must be completed before production begins. Then they write the songs, make demos for the production team to hear, make any

requested changes, and make a final recording. The final recording is then played back on the set so that the actor(s) can lip-sync accurately. (It is called a *prerecord* when the music is recorded prior to shooting so it can be played back on the set.) This entire process, from writing to release of the film, can take anywhere from one to three years. Note that because all of the recording must be completed before the shooting of a scene, often the songs will be completed as long as a year before the release of the movie.

In writing a score for a musical, songwriters are usually involved with the screenwriters. Alan Bergman talks about the process of creating the music for *Yentl* with songwriting partners Marilyn Bergman and Michel Legrand, as well as Barbra Streisand—producer, director, and star of the film:

We agreed that this was a wonderful book for a musical. From the moment Yentl puts on the clothes of a boy and begins the masquerade, she cannot express to anyone her true feelings as a woman. This inner monologue was a perfect opportunity for music.

So, first we spotted where the songs should be. Then we started writing. Michel is a dramatist; the best composers are dramatists. For one song, we said to him, "Yentl's father has just passed away. This is the first time she's been away from her village. It's a dark night in a forest and she is alone. In a way, she's pleading with her father." Michel wrote the melody that expressed in musical terms what our thoughts were for this song, and we wrote "Papa, Can You Hear Me."

When he writes, or when anybody writes the music first, which we prefer, there are words on the tips of those notes and we have to find them. It's a search.

Exploring, being a dramatist, finding just the right words to go with a character and a story are the jobs of the songwriter in a musical. These are the songs that are featured and are often the reason the audience goes to see the film.

Source Music

There are many, many instances of songs that are not featured and that are part of the background of the actual scene. *Source music* is any music that appears to be coming from a “source” on screen. Said another way, it is any music the actors in the scene can hear. Car radios, home stereos, bands in a nightclub, street musicians, and actors humming in the shower are all examples of source music. Source music can be familiar songs by known artists, songs by new artists, or music written by the composer specifically for the film. Source music can be strictly in the background as part of the aural landscape along with various sound effects, or it can become a strong dramatic statement.

Songs used as source music are usually chosen by the director, often with the assistance of the music supervisor. In the case of instrumental source music, it can be chosen from existing recordings, the composer can write or arrange something, or another composer can be brought in to do the source cues.

Dramatic Use of Source Music

Often, source music is mixed in the film at barely audible levels; it is frequently part of a room’s ambient sound, far in the background. However, there are times when source music can play an important dramatic role in the film. The proper choice of songs can create an atmosphere that runs the gamut of dramatic possibilities. Composers often interweave the source music with the underscore in order to add to a dramatic situation.

For example, in *The Pelican Brief*, there is a scene where Julia Roberts leaves a hospital in fear of her life and ventures down a crowded New Orleans street, eventually ending up alone in a hotel room. The first thing we hear is James Horner’s underscore consisting of piano and strings as she leaves the hospital. This fades into source cues as she goes down the street in a state of shock. These source cues consist of different kinds of rock or jazz music emanating from each nightclub she passes, and they blend one into the other as she weaves through the partying crowd. Finally, the underscore fades back in while the last piece of source music fades out (called *cross-fading*). This whole

sequence has a continuity because of the way the music is structured. The source music reflects the craziness of the New Orleans nightlife, and as each song fades in and out, we experience what the actor is experiencing. The underscore gives the audience the sense of what she is actually feeling—fear, uncertainty, and confusion—helping to make the transition from the hospital to the street, and eventually to the hotel room.

Source Music to Establish Time or Place

In addition to dramatic usage, source music often establishes a time or place. By using source music that is indigenous to a culture, the feeling of that culture is placed in the mind of the audience. The underscore can then also use elements of the cultural music, or it can be a completely different entity.

There are also countless films that have used source music to establish a time in history, such as *Anne of the Thousand Days*, *The Madness of King George*, and *Shakespeare In Love* (see chapter 17).

The Composer and Source Music

The composer may or may not be involved in creating source music. It depends on the kind of underscore being written, and whether or not the composer has the musical background to write what is needed. If the movie needs source music describing a specific culture or time period, the composer must have the research and musical skills to write the appropriate music. If the underscore is closely related to the source music, or uses elements of it, it is best to have the composer also write the source music. However, if the source music is in a style unfamiliar to the composer, he will hire someone else to do those cues. In addition, if there are sequences like the one in *The Pelican Brief* described above, then the composer must at least be aware of the key, instrumentation, style and tempo of the source cues.

Whether or not the composer is involved in the source music also depends on dramatic considerations. Often, songs used as source music are taken from existing recordings and the composer is not part

of the selection process. However, there are times when the composer is asked to write a source cue that is not a song, most likely an instrumental of some kind. The composer can utilize the players at the recording session for the underscore to record the source music. This is an efficient way to create source music without getting clearances and having extra recording sessions. In addition, if the composer writes the source music, then the theme for the film can be worked into it, as Alan Silvestri did during the fiesta scene in *Romancing the Stone*.

People often wonder why they don't remember hearing many of the songs on the CD soundtrack in the movie. The answer is, they probably did hear those songs, but they were source cues played for only a few seconds at a very low volume under dialogue. However, many record companies are quite content to have their artist's songs in the film as source cues, as long as they also appear on the soundtrack album. Soundtrack albums are now one of the biggest financial considerations in making a film.

Soundtrack Albums

At one point during the summer of 1998, three of the top five best-selling albums were movie soundtracks. And for the whole year of 1998, twenty-two of Billboard's top 200 albums were also soundtracks. The top selling album of 1998 was the soundtrack to *Titanic*, which grossed \$26 million in sales for that year alone and spawned two subsequent *Titanic* soundtracks—one with more songs, and another with James Horner's underscore. During that same year, soundtrack album sales rose by an amazing 36 percent.¹

With these kinds of numbers, it is no wonder that producers are all hopping on the soundtrack bandwagon, hoping to generate both profit and publicity for their films through the use of songs. This is not a new phenomenon, although the current sales numbers and profit levels are higher than ever. As discussed in chapter 5, from the earliest days of talkies, producers have used songs in films. In today's film-making world, this process is not so easy as simply commissioning a songwriter to create a tune for the film; there are many different elements to take into consideration. In an age where the record

companies and film studios are often owned by the same conglomerates, there are several dimensions to the game. Financial considerations, not the creative ones, are often the overriding factors in making a soundtrack. Michael Greene, president of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, which produces the Grammy awards, discusses this trend:

The connection between soundtracks and films has never been more vibrant. Not only have there been more soundtracks issued, but you have to back up and remember some of the reasons why—not the least of which is that many of the film companies are also the owners of the music companies. So they've found a good way to cross-promotionalize the music and films to everybody's advantage.²

There are many films where the use of songs in the film is fabulous, entertaining, and totally appropriate. However, there are many that shoehorn songs into the film in order to get the song on the soundtrack album. The problem is that this often ignores the wishes of the film's creative team: the director, writer, editor, and composer. The people that win most often in the soundtrack game are the record companies, artists, and film producers. The lament frequently heard from those in the creative parts of the film industry is that the "suits," or businessmen, are making decisions that have nothing to do with the quality of the movie—only with the ability to "cross-promotionalize" and increase profits. Truth be told, this is a complaint that has echoed throughout the history of Hollywood, only at no time has it been so loud or futile. Film making is essentially a commercial enterprise, and with the kinds of profits that can be made, there is much motivation to exploit this burgeoning soundtrack market and little motivation to give creative considerations more weight. As music supervisor Jeff Carson says, "How do you make a hit movie *and* a hit soundtrack, and make them work together at the same time?" It is not easy. It can be done, and yet the mystery is that no one really knows which soundtracks will take off and which will be duds.

There are many different paths a particular song can take to find its way into a film. It can be commissioned by the producer; it can be

requested by the director; it can be suggested by the film editor, music editor, or composer; or it can be part of the catalogue of the publishing company that the movie studio happens to own. The film could use the original performance, or record a new version. In all these instances, sync licenses need to be issued, clearances obtained, and royalty deals hammered out. If there are to be recording sessions for a song, someone must produce and oversee them. There are also budgets to adhere to. All of these elements are part of the complex process of bringing a song to a film, a process that is usually managed by the music supervisor.

Music Supervisor

The *music supervisor* is a role that has developed since the late 1970s into what we know today. It is a hybrid of many aspects of the music scoring business. Although there has often been someone with the title “music supervisor” since the earliest days of sound films, the tasks that today’s music supervisor fulfills are vastly different from those of his counterpart fifty years ago.

The main job of the music supervisor is to oversee the process of placing songs in a film. These can be songs that are eventually used on the soundtrack album, or songs that are used strictly for source music. The music supervisor communicates with the composer, but does not oversee the composing of the underscore. Also, it is important to know that there are essentially two types of music supervisors: those that simply organize the choosing and clearance of the songs, and those that are musically trained and can produce a recording session as well.

The tasks that a music supervisor fulfills are as follows:

Creating and monitoring budgets. Since the music supervisor is often doing some of the actual business negotiations on behalf of the producer, he usually assists in creating a music budget for the film. This can involve budgeting only for the use of songs, if that is what the score is, and can also include overseeing the finances of recording the

underscore and hiring the composer. It is also the music supervisor’s job to oversee the day-to-day budgets in the recording studio during production of any songs.

Helping to pick the songs. This is often the largest part of the music supervisor’s job. Which songs are chosen depends on many factors, including the budget, the director’s wishes, the producer’s wishes, instructions from the executives at the movie studio, which artists and publishers agree to allow use of their songs, and which artists are available for recording. It can be a difficult and politically complicated labyrinth to negotiate.

Getting clearance for songs. Before a song is used in a movie, permission must be obtained. First, the publisher must grant *sync rights*, the right to synchronize the song with the movie. If the producer or director wants to use the original version of a song, then a second permission must be granted by the owner of the original master-recording—usually the record company. The music supervisor either handles the negotiations for these clearances himself, or hires a music clearance company to do that work.

Record producing. No matter whether it is an old song being rerecorded or a song commissioned for the film, the music supervisor often produces the recording session. This job is often done by the film composer if he wrote or co-wrote the song, and sometimes an outside record producer is contracted. But even then, the music supervisor makes sure these sessions go smoothly and stay on budget. Whether old songs are re-recorded or not depends on how much money the record company wants for the use of the original master. Sometimes it is cheaper to use the master; sometimes it is cheaper to redo it.

Recommending the composer. Because the music supervisor is often involved in the project at an early date, often he is asked to recommend a composer he considers appropriate for the film, and who fits the budget.

Overseeing the temp track. Often the music supervisor is part of the team, with the music editor and director, that chooses the music and builds the temp track.

Overseeing music performed on camera. If there is a scene where the actors are singing or dancing, the music supervisor will be present to ensure that everything is going well. This means making sure the playback is correct and that the lip-syncing is accurate.

As mentioned above, helping to pick the songs for the film is a large part of the music supervisor's job. Although the process can sometimes go fairly smoothly, many, many problems can arise in the clearing of publishing rights, as well as clearing the use of original masters. In addition, there are often many different voices trying to influence the song selection process. Producers and directors often request specific songs; some are reasonable requests, some are out of the range of their budget, and some will not be released by the artist, record company, or publisher. There is the screenwriter, who may have written the idea for a specific song into the script. Then there is the movie studio, which might own a certain record company, and they want to promote its artists. The film editor, who has worked with the film for several months, has his own ideas. And there are even the spouses of these people that can get into the act, because *everyone* has an opinion about music and songs! This situation is familiar to music supervisor, Daniel Carlin:

It's not just picking any song that will work. Anybody that listens to the radio can do that. We've got to have a budget. We've got to think about a soundtrack deal, we've got to think about the politics. For example, say I go in and I put this great Mariah Carey song into a scene. What if the budget is \$300,000 for 30 songs and I have just spent \$100,000 of the budget? Because the director falls in love with it and will not have it any other way, that does not do anybody any good. Now everybody is fighting. The director is fighting with the studio, and somebody goes, "Who is the jerk that put this Mariah Carey song in there in the first place?" I don't want to be the guy who raises his hand.

The music supervisor is often caught in the crossfire of these situations because he is the one handling the songs. And it often comes back to the idea that movie making is a balance, and not always a deli-

cate one, between creativity and commerce. When so many different powers are trying to influence the use of songs, it can get diplomatically difficult for the music supervisor.

Jeff Carson:

Music supervision is kind of like trying to thread five needles at once, or hit five bulls-eyes all at once. It's very difficult to hit five bulls-eyes all at once. You're trying to accommodate the movie with the right music, you're trying to please the director, the producer, the studio executives, the studio's music department. Everybody.

There is no one rule, or guide, for how much a song will cost. If it is going to be the title of the movie, obviously the owner of the copyright will ask for more money. If it is a well-known song by a well-known artist, then that will cost more than an unknown song by an up-and-coming artist. Daniel Carlin creates a hypothetical example of the kinds of negotiations that take place:

There is no law or rule about this stuff. You go to the publisher with hat in hand, and you say, "Here's our movie, here's our budget, and here's how much money we have to spend. Can you help us out?" And it depends. I mean if it's a one-hundred-million-dollar movie, they're not going to give you the song for eight thousand. But if you make a three-million-dollar movie, and you can them tell it's a labor of love for everybody, then they might say: "Here's what I'll do for you, I'll make a deal if you use five of our songs, and I'll give them to you for \$6,500 each." And that way they get paid not only what I pay them for the songs, but then, when it goes on television, they get those residuals. Then it gets released overseas and gets more residuals. So they make up a package deal. The volume helps them, and it helps me too. And it also means that I'm not going to put in a competing singer. I'm gonna have five of their songs, and it makes everybody's life easier.

As you can see, there are countless ways that songs can be used in a film, and many different motives for using them. The balance between creative and financial considerations is a tricky one that everyone in the film-making business experiences. Unfortunately, everyone involved rarely shares the same vision for the music, especially when there are songs involved. Because royalties and sales profits generated from songs and soundtrack albums are enormous, there are many interested people other than the film makers who try to sway the choices. The director might want it one way, the producer another, the movie studio a third, and an interested record company a fourth. There are often two conflicting goals in the choosing of what kind of music to have: the creative choice, based on the director's vision for the film; and the commercial choice, which is based on what will make the most money, both in soundtrack album sales and in helping to promote the popularity of the film. The music supervisor guides the process of choosing songs, whether they are intended for a soundtrack album or not. And hopefully he is able to guide the process towards serving the drama as well as serving the financial bottom line.