

They're Playing Your Song

Music supervisors: Not Just Plugging In The Pop hits of the Day

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Excerpt 1 Not only do we all have our own song which evokes the essence of a time period, person or an event. But often, these anthems of the heart or the heartbroken, are part of a memory or consciousness that is shared with a larger population. So to transport an audience back emotionally to a movie set in the Summer Of Love or The Summer of Sam, there are tunes that a music supervisor can call on to provide sonic set decoration. When music supervisor [Bonnie Greenberg](#) (**The Grinch That Stole Christmas**) wants us to feel the passage of time in **Dead Presidents**, set during the Vietnam War, she may move from **I Was Born To Love Her** by Stevie Wonder (1967) to the O'Jays' **Love Train** (1973).

As [Alex Steyermark](#) (**Hedwig/Angry Inch**), who has worked with Spike Lee (**Summer Of Sam**, **Bamboozled**) and Ang Lee (**Ice Storm**, **Ride With The Devil**), pointed out, more than just a recollection of a person or an event, the song or tune provokes a sense memory of a bygone era etc., bypassing the conscious mind in the same way a smell of fresh cut grass will deliver us back to a time in our youth in a more complete way. "That is why Spike and I got the original analog masters tapes on Crooklyn, because we found you even remember the hiss of the tape. Once you are there mentally, the score then further clarifies the dramatic elements of the story," Steyermark said.

Excerpt 2 When the tune works, whether it's "My Heart Will Go On," Bruce Hornsby's "Shadowlands" from **Bamboozled**, "Night and Day" from **What Women Want**, or "Pilgrim" from the indie hit **You Can Count on Me**, it fulfills the prime goal of a good music supervisor-to serve the film. With the increased popularity of soundtrack albums (at one time every studio and every director thought they had to have one), the interests of the film occasionally take a back seat, as Spike Lee puts it, to "the monster of

cross promotion," and the greed for money that a successful soundtrack CD can generate. Often the corporation that owns the movie company may be motivated to use a song soundtrack because they also own the record company whose artists they seek to promote. "Even the end titles suffer," Lee explains. "Instead of one continuous piece of music playing over the credits, that preserves or amplifies the mood of the film, they may throw in pieces of four or five songs. They look at Billboard and the demographics associated with the film. It may not even be the group's best writing, it might just be some tracks that got left off a previous album." This is not to say that there have not been great soundtrack albums, like those for "Easy Rider" or "Black Orpheus", or that a soundtrack album can't aid a film.

A song soundtrack deal can allow a smaller film to use music it could never afford, because the record company may pick up part of the cost of the soundtrack in anticipation of future profits. Or as the label E Squared did for "**All The Pretty Horses**", provide the film with their artists to showcase their label.

Though it appears to be waning, the focus on song soundtracks, has damaged the music supervisor's relationship with the composer, who often see the music supervisor as the enemy. "This happens because some music supervisors are really 'album supervisors', who are looking for any angle to push the score out and put a song in", Bonnie Greenberg explained. "Composers and their scores have suffered because of this."

When Bonnie worked on "**Pleasantville**", at first she received a chilly reception from Randy Newman during the spotting session, where they establish the exact spots and room for the songs and score. After seeing that his score was not cannibalized or pushed out by Bonnie's songs, Randy Newman sent her a bouquet of flowers thanking her for her help. "He understood I was about the movie not making a record, I care about all the music in the movie," Bonnie said. "When I'm just making a record, I fight not to take the title of music supervisor, because I don't feel that is what I'm doing."

The pressure of creating a soundtrack album is just another task added to the seemingly endless to do list of a music supervisor which includes bargaining with record and publishing companies for tunes from major artists (which can at times be like negotiating fees for sports stars with their agents). So if you wanted to use the recording of **Respect** by Aretha Franklin, both Aretha Franklin's record company (master recording rights)

and the songwriter's (Otis Redding) publishing company (mechanical rights) would have to be dealt with.

Then of course you work with the director and his team in placing or spotting the music in the film. You are in charge of every bit of "playback", i.e., every bit of music that is performed on the screen from an orchestra at a wedding to the tune the film's star is whistling in the shower. If there is an onstage performance, you have to arrange for the tune to be performed live, possibly by an actor who isn't a singer and needs weeks of rehearsal or you may be sliding the tune around digitally if the tune is lip synched poorly, so it will look like someone is really singing it etc., etc.

A victim of doing too many things too well, Bonnie, a former music lawyer, once contemplated leaving the business, "You may love what you're doing but it can really burn you out". Considering the impact the music supervisor has on the film and the varied tasks he or she must perform, they are probably one of the poorest paid of the high profile performers in film. Why would anyone take the job?

First and foremost they all love music and movies. Bonnie Greenberg is a threat to break into song at the drop of a hat. Once as she was being wheeled into surgery she traded verses of **My Fair Lady**, with an orderly who said, "Just relax, it's just like breathing out and breathing in." (Bonnie: You mean you were supremely independent and content before we met). Alex Steyermark, who spent a year and a half on the music for Malcolm X, is perfectly willing to spend thousands of hours researching period songs and lyrics for Ang Lee. Barry Cole (**American Psycho**, **Julie Johnson**) still DJ's regularly in clubs because he says, "It's the one time I can play music and not have to make a phone call afterwards".

Also finding tunes and securing right is not always such an arduous task, sometimes it's a mutual musical attraction drawing supervisors who are looking for tunes together with representatives from record labels who are looking to place their artists.

Often the record labels hire representation like Music For The Masses, run by Julie D'Angelo, (who is up for a Grammy for her work on "Respect" A Century of Women In Music) to find spots in films that will make their music shine. Julie who helped place the music included in "**For Love or Country, The Arturo Sandoval Story**", can provide a music supervisor with anything from hardcore punk to jazz and Gregorian chant.

When you go to license a song by George Gershwin, you may find someone like Warner Chappell's Jay Morgenstern, who besides being a huge fan of Gershwin, could provide you with a history of all the artists who performed "But Not for Me" and a list of shows and movies in which the tune appeared.

Occasionally tunes will be provided to smaller films at a significant discount because the labels know they don't have the budget of a major film. If however you come to a label when you *do* have some real money to spend and still pass the film off as lower budget film, you will lose the ability to ever extract a favor from that label again. Like the elephant, "they never forget" getting burned.

Certainly one of the payoffs for a music supervisor is working with artists you like and admire. After interning with Spike Lee (where he worked on "**Crooklyn**"), Barry Cole started getting work as a music supervisor (after parking cars and walking dogs) at The Shooting Gallery, which was making a habit of funding good scripts and talented filmmakers, who did not have the track record many production companies demanded. His first high profile project was working with a talented actor, Billy Bob Thorton, who had repeatedly been turned down by every major (and minor) studio in his bid to direct his first feature "**Slingblade**".

Barry simply aided Billy Bob Thorton, who teamed with Daniel Lanois composer/ guitarist/record producer (U2's "**Joshua Tree**", Peter **Gabriel's "SO"**) extraordinaire, in carrying out his vision for a soundtrack that would speak for the inner dialog of the movies' quirky hero Karl, a man of very few words. "Neither Billy or Daniel was dying to do an epic like Star Wars", Barry explained. "The two got together in a room and Daniel came up with a great soundtrack he created with his guitar and some acts that he produced and befriended like Emmy Lou Harris and Bambi Lee Savage." Barry's relationship with Thorton continues in force to the present day where he supervised "**All The Pretty Horses**" and "**Daddy And Them**".

Though Barry has worked on bigger projects he often applies himself and the vast library of songs he has accumulated over the past five years, in giving the royal treatment to lower budget Indie films like, "**You Can Count On Me**" and "**Loving Jezebel**". "A director of a one million dollar film may say, 'I really like Bob Dylan', which would exhaust our entire budget, which may be ten percent of the cost of that film," Alex said. "So I might say I know a guy who sounds and writes like Dylan who

will fit into our budget." "You have to know your song library, because this guy might have sent us a CD not two weeks ago but two years ago. Even if you have a big budget you have to pick your "money spots". Just cause you can afford a hit by U2, it doesn't mean it will work for the movie. A hit song may distract the audience during an intimate scene in a diner or a bedroom."

As stimulating as it is to work as a music supervisor outside the constraints of a big budget film and Hollywood on independent films, there are projects you loved that will never get a fair hearing. "No matter how great the cast, story or director, or how hard you worked or what brilliant deals you made, the film may never see the light of day or attract an audience," Barry said. "Or you will spend three months setting up "on camera bits" in pre-production and it will all be cut in post (production). If I worried about every film I'd tear my hair out".

Some of the real art in music supervising comes when you have to actually create the song track from scratch. A perfect case in point is "**Unconditional Love**", where Bonnie Greenberg had to form a style of songs to fit the character that Jonathan Pryce plays and have Pryce coached in how to sing them. Then like a good director, make sure that there is a realistic consistency in his performance, so he has develops a recognizable style like Humperdink, Sinatra etc., that runs through all his performances. Then of course you have to license all the rights to perform all the songs and then go into the studio to perform all the tracks. "With director PJ Hogan we had a hand in picking the lead because they had to sing. Had the lead not been able to sing we would have got a studio singer whose voice matched the tenor and character of the actor's speaking voice".



The Mau-Maus, a gangsta-rapper group, records a song for Spike Lee's Bamboozled, supervised by Alex Steyermark

When a band or singer is performing on screen, music supervisor Alex Steyermark and Spike Lee try to whenever possible, record bands and vocals live. "I think it makes the performance more believable than lip synching, especially for certain types of music like punk rock, which we used for **"Summer Of Sam"** or rap like in **"Bamboozled"**". On the film **"Bamboozled"**, Alex was faced with a number of daunting technical challenges to record live performances. There was the TV show minstrel music, rap performance in which the band sang live vocals against prerecorded tracks. "We even recorded Actor/dancer Savion Glovers taps (dancing) live", Alex explained. (Previously Savion Glover's rhythmically complex taps had been the sole percussion on Abbey Lincoln's historic recording of **"Who Used To Dance"**)

One of the reasons that the score and songs in Spike Lee's films blend together in such a consistently coherent manner is that composer Terence Blanchard, Alex Steyermark and Spike Lee have been part of the same team since **"Malcolm X"**. "Alex is sitting with us when we are making the decisions about where and when songs and music goes in and how loud it is going to be. He is there everyday of the mix. Alex's only agenda is to serve the film and if that means caring for what happens to Terence's score that's what he does. I know how important music is to the film believe me. I've looked at my films without it. I'm not one of these directors who say after the film is shot, 'now we need some music'. I'm thinking about the music as I write the script."

"The fact that Spike grew up around music has given him an insight into the art and a tremendous respect for those who perform it. I'm blessed to work for such a musical director and that is why he can call artists like Stevie Wonder (**"Jungle Fever"**, **"Bamboozled"**) and Prince (**"Girl Six"**) to provide him with songs for his films within the lower budget he has to work with" Cole said. "I've always loved music, "Spike Lee said. "Not only did my father play in a jazz setting, but I also saw him play with Josh White, Theo Bikel and Odetta. That's why I believe there is good music in all genres."

Spike Lee's wide palate of musical tastes allowed him to come up with the unusual but tremendously effective score for **"He Got Game"**, for

which chose the works of Aaron Copland, to enrich a movie about basketball and the game of life. Alex comments, "For me **He Got Game** was a return to my days of a music editor, editing Copland's themes for the different scenes in the movie. Spikes musical choices often fly in the face of tradition, using songs for score and using lyric intensive songs against dialog. "The human brain is amazing. You can watch TV do your homework and carry on a conversation, research has supported it. So audiences can certainly distinguish between the song and dialog." Lee said.

Allan and Albert Hughes also give music a prominent role in their films, something that made Bonnie Greenberg's job on "**Dead Presidents**" a joy, as she pointed out. "It was a dream job. It was music I loved and directors I loved working with. A lot of that has to do with how the director envisions music. And they really wanted the music to be part of the story telling. It's great when you know that your music is another character in the film. When it's played through a radio or jukebox, they make sure the audience can hear it, it plays an important part in the scene. They take great care in how the music is mixed or played whether it is sitting underneath the dialog or played in the background. They are meticulous in how they use source versus score. The score is what the audience hears and source is what the character hears or is part of the environment (bar or nightclub) they are in. Ssource, a hybrid of both, is when you use a piece of source music as score we did that in "**Menace To Society**".

I would be remiss without commenting on the work of a generation of music supervisors who worked when the "studio system" was hail and hearty. Certainly the most storied musical section was the Freed unit (Roger Edens and Arthur Freed) at **MGM** which was responsible for films like "**Gigi**", "**Singin' In The Rain**" and "**An American In Paris**".

Lela Simone functioned as the music supervisor there working in concert with possibly the finest studio orchestra ever assembled and a staff, which included Conrad Salinger, who by all accounts was the premier arranger in Hollywood at the time. Great composers like Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Leonard Bernstein and Betty Comden and Adolph Green came to the studio along with their songs. Any adjustment "to picture" would be done by the author.

Betty Comden ("**Singin In The Rain**", "**It's Always Fair Weather**"), who has sat down to write, songs, lyrics and plays with her partner Adolph Green, every work day for the past fifty years, (whether she had an assignment or not) really did it for the love of it. Her work was not driven

by deals or demographically preplanned. There was much less "wrangling" with artistic egos because as Betty Comden tells it, it was a more roll up your sleeves and go to work attitude. Even if you didn't get the assignment you thought you were the best person for, as Betty pointed out. "Even though I wasn't happy with the changes they made to **"On The Town"** where much of Leonard Bernstein's wonderful score was trashed. (Roger Eden The studios were like big cities and everyone had their job and everyday you went to work. You went from one project to another without all the complications that are built in now. It was another days work."

What hasn't changed from then to now, is that one of the most important qualities of a music supervisor is their ability to be a diplomat. When Johnny Green was driving the great talents at MGM to distraction, by not letting them do their work without jumping through unnecessary hoops; Lela was the woman in the middle who became the buffer, the peacemaker the author of the treaties.

Barry Cole sums it up best. "If you are going to be a music supervisor, you need to prepare yourself to be a diplomat, a buffer, the man or woman in the middle. On the surface, it looks like you come in, listen to music, slap it against the picture, go to the movie premiere, get a soundtrack, and there you go. But there are all these things you need to do, like working with the director and his creative vision, working with the producer and the financial parameters of the entire film. Then going to the record companies, where the new wave of thinking now is that every film, especially an indie film, doesn't need or deserve a soundtrack." "That's the craft of the job, how you work your way through those potholes to give the director what he wants in terms of his vision. At the same time, giving the producers what they need, with a bright red ribbon tied around it, so they can take it to a distributor and get their money. All that in addition to rights negotiations, knowing the whole time that, in the end, it's all about the film. Because without the film there is no music."

Music Supervisor movie list.

Barry Cole

"Niagra Niagra" (1997)

"Next Stop Wonderland" (1998)

"O" (2001) teen version of Othello

Once In the Life (2000) one of Barry's favorites because of the give and take with Fishburne and the amount of learning that took place working with Branford

Marsalis, whose knowledge of music Barry calls encyclopedic. Also huge disappointment that film opened so small and did so poorly.

Alex Steyermark

"Four Little Girls" 1997 (Spikes favorite opening tune)

"Ulee's Gold" 1997 (one of Alex's favorites he helped find the composer for the film)

"I Know What You Did Last Summer" 1997 (His big Hollywood film one that he enjoyed doing)

"Clockers" 1995 one of the finest song soundtrack albums. Although Spike fought for a separate score soundtrack the record company's "hold back" of Blanchard's orchestral CD made sure the song album would not be confused the orchestral recording nobody heard.



Bonnie Greenberg

"Truth About Cat's and Dogs" 1996 one of her favorite final products.

"Tank Girl" 1993 although she doesn't specialize in AAA alternative this movie broke a number of groups like Garbage and Portis Head.

"My Best Friends Wedding" 1997 Contains some of her favorite songs including Jann Arden's version for movie only of "You Don't Know Me"

"Flirting With Disaster" 1996

"What Women Want" Changed from totally Frank Sinatra songtrack for song Night and Day

on balcony romance scene so as not to distract viewer from what was happening