FILM COMPOSERS IN THE SONIC WARS

by Robert Hershon

Even though soundtracks generally figure in more frames than a film's multimillion dollar stars, they are most often composed, conducted, and recorded in three weeks or less (in the case of Jerry Goldsmith's *Chinatown*, ten days), frequently under pressure from studios who have spent those millions, and more or less run out of time. (Stravinsky, after previewing a film he was hired to score, remarked how wonderful it was and guaranteed delivery of his music in nine or ten months.) The coherent and beautifully crafted scores which artists like Jerry Goldsmith and James Horner compose, then, must be seen as minor miracles, ones they produce on demand.

Scoring for films also requires playing musical chairs with dialog and sound effects. Rather than coexisting in the same sonic space as those elements, the composer must dance with and around these elements so the score won't be cut or pushed into deep background. No matter how careful a composer is, the recording engineer must be able to navigate within the vagaries of the Dolby matrix system. Like a car that understeers, he must steer sounds in a unique manner to avoid collisions.

If dialog, a mass of sound effects, and music start piling up in a mix, a talented mixer (with time), like Disney's Terry Porter (*Pocahontas, The Lion King, 101 Dalmatians*) or scoring mixer Shawn Murphy (*Apollo 13, Courage Under Fire, The Devil's Own*) can clear the traffic jam from the center channel, where music runs the risk of being "cleared out for dialog"—a process where music that gets near the dialog or sound effects is gobbled up by a sonic immune system.

FROM THE THREAT OF HAVING THEIR SCORES BURIED UNDER SOUND EFFECTS BY A POOR MIXER, TO THE DIFFICULTY OF HAVING A SOUNDTRACK CD RELEASED, IT'S A CONSTANT STRUGGLE FOR FILM COMPOSERS TO HAVE THEIR WORK HEARD.

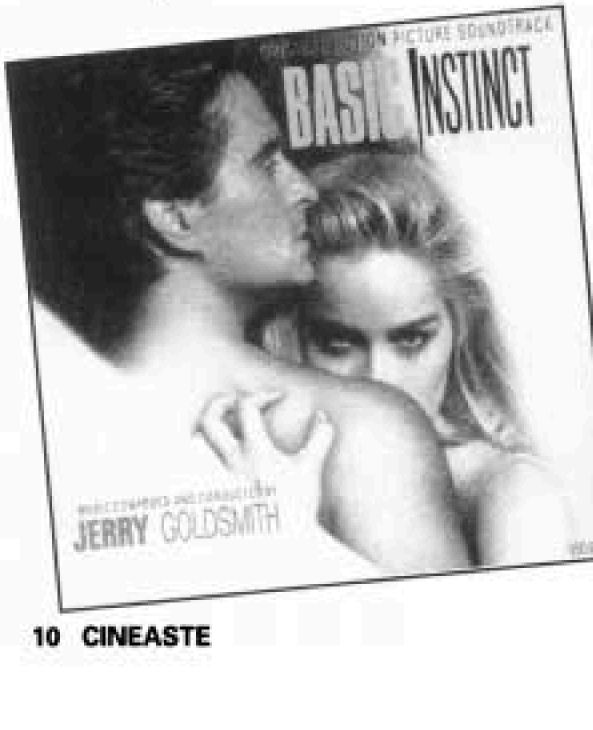
Along with mixers like Terry and Shawn, the 'white knights' in this scenario are Dolby Surround, which can reestablish sonic elbow room, and Dolby SR noise reduction, which can expand the limited head room of the optical format (which is *not* optimal for music), painting the music, sound effects, and dialog in a more flattering light. "The profile of the movie (comedy, blockbuster, art house flick) often dictates whether Dolby SR is applied, because it cannot be reproduced properly by theaters set up for Dolby A," Terry Porter explained.

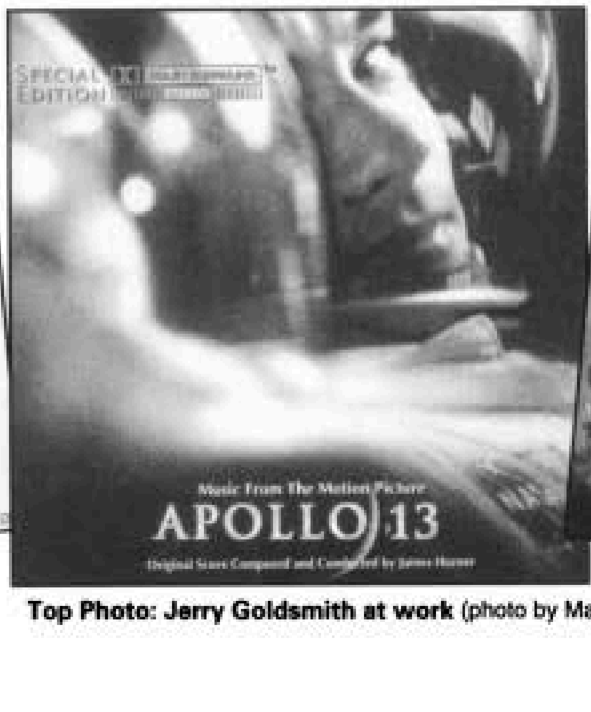
Even if a score manages successfully to negotiate this sonic obstacle course, like one of this year's finest scores, *Fly Away Home* by Mark Isham (*Nell, A River Runs Through It*), the music may never make it to the record stores if it is saddled with an astronomical 'new use fee.' This fee, which is levied on all union-recorded film scores in the U.S., is calculated by adding the number of musicians in the orchestra, the number of days they work, and how many minutes of their music is used (four extra seconds could cost $15,000).

The new use fee is a partial repayment to musicians like percussionist/vibist Emil Richard (*Taxi Driver*), pianist Mike Lang (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*), flutist James Walker (*Joy Luck Club*), or trumpeter Tim Morrison (*Apollo 13*), who usually get no screen credit despite the fact that the name of the twentieth production assistant appears in foot-high letters.

The release of a large orchestral score might cost anywhere from $50,000 to $100,000 before you press one CD or take out one ad. "Unless it's a blockbuster film with Stallone, recorded overseas, or has songs by Prince or Janet Jackson, it may never see the light of day," Angelo Badalamenti (*Twin Peaks, Blue Velvet*) explained. So a great score submerged in a film seen by millions may never get a fair hearing.

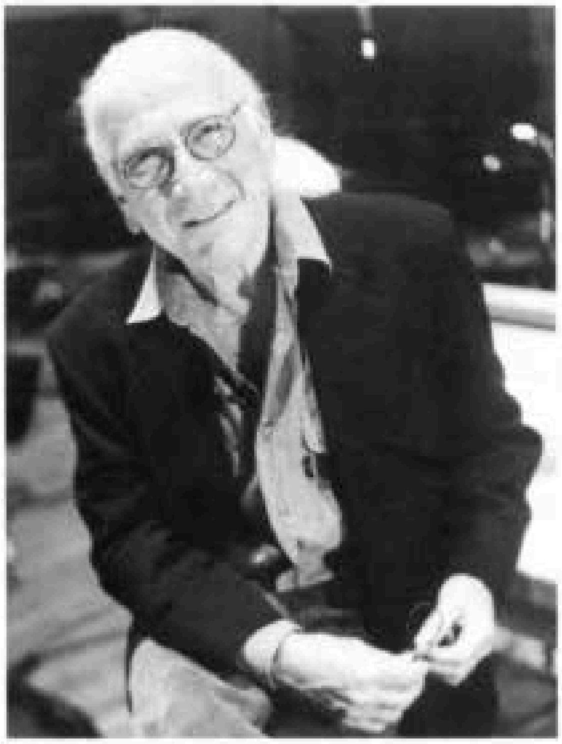
Fly Away Home is a perfect case in point. Sony Pictures, as well as Sony Records, have been besieged by requests for a soundtrack that would include Mary Chapin Carpenter's performance of the film's folk song,





Top Photo: Jerry Goldsmith at work (photo by Matthew Peak)

James Horner



Jerry Goldsmith (photo by Matthew Peak)

Elliot Goldenthal

"Ten Thousand Miles," something that would guarantee enough CD sales to offset the large new use fee. Though the record company which holds the rights to the hit song is often painted as the villain in these scenarios, Carpenter's label, Sony Records, which has seen their phone ring off the hook, has yet to be contacted by *any* soundtrack label seeking the release of the song.

To keep Mark Isham's score from falling through the cracks, Sony Pictures is mounting a major campaign to have Mark Isham nominated for an Oscar, knowing that all the record companies will beat down his door if the score receives an Academy nomination. John Lurie, who scored Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger In Paradise* and *Down By Law*, feels that scoring for Hollywood "is often more about backroom deals to acquire 'hit songs' than composing."

It's the conflict of sight vs. sound, or perhaps just the size and scope of the production, which heightens the quixotic nature of the business. Even though composers know they're just a piece of the puzzle, they are often made to feel their contributions are disposable. Once, on a break from the dubbing stage, for example, a composer discovered that the dusty old paper lying in the corner he was about to roll his joint in was Erich Wolfgang Korngold's score for *Robin Hood*. When a major studio decided to ax its music library, James Horner begged them for a copy of his score for *Brainstorm*. Sorry, they said, it would have to go with the rest of the library.

When a composer is given the resources and the time, the results can be remarkable, as with *Apollo 13: The Surround Sound Limited Edition*. Someone finally got the message that people wanted to take the whole surround-sound package home on CD. With music as the first priority, this CD, which also features the dialog, the sound effects of the launch and in-space explosions, as well as the obligatory pop songs by The Young Rascals, Jefferson Airplane, et al., shows what can be done with the medium.

"It was owing not only to the genius of Shawn Murphy that my music could exist with such huge sound effects, but also sound designer Steve Flick, who retuned the sounds of liftoff, so my music could tonally complement them," James Horner explained. "Shawn gave the brass such a great low end that it focused the low rumble of the launch." Murphy pointed out that some of the bass frequencies available to the recordist are not used because the powers that be often decide it will not receive a proper hearing at the other end. Evidently they have never seen the bills for my surround-sound stereo speakers.

"I would love to have given *Braveheart*, which had over seventy minutes of my finest work, the same kind of sonic liftoff but it wasn't as high profile a project," Horner commented. The folks at Disney almost always use the original film technicians for transfers to the home market, often managing a mix that satisfies kids who watch it on TV, as well as the audiophiles who decode it.

Horner pointed out that the high visibility of Disney films like *Pocahontas* guarantee

A good mixer like Shawn Murphy can be a composer's best friend (photo by Kelvin Jones).

it special treatment on the dubbing stage and at the Oscars. The Academy last year chose to bypass Horner once again, who was nominated for *Apollo 13* as well as *Braveheart*. Weeks before they 'opened the envelope,' I was warned by an Academy member against banking on Horner as a winning pick because he has ruffled a number of feathers among the Hollywood flock.

Musically, James Horner has a nice tendency to underscore big scenes of tension and release with sparse instrumentation or chorus. This quiet, reflective approach can be heard as the astronauts approach reentry in *Apollo 13* or in the vengeful assassination at the end of *Legends of the Fall*. "Instead of using chorus to part the Red Sea like The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, I prefer to use chorus like I did in *Apollo 13* or *Glory*, to reflect quiet determination and decisions of thoughtful men in critical stress."

"Ultimately, it's up to the director," Horner pointed out. "Even if what he does is in bad taste. It's a bit like being a prostitute. You know your client must be made up to in the best way possible, so you at least try to start with the stuff dreams are made of. *Braveheart* was an exceptional project because of the knowledge and experience Mel Gibson brought to the film. All most people know about him are his action flicks."

Jerry Goldsmith *(Star Trek: First Contact)* expanded on Horner's comments, "When they [the studios] buy your score, it's like a jacket. If they want to cut off the sleeves and make a vest, it's up to them," said Goldsmith, who saw his score for *Legend* axed in favor of one by Tangerine Dream.

Most recently, Goldsmith has rescued and restored for posterity the score of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is presented for the first time in its entirety. Entire sections of Alex North's revolutionary jazz score were eliminated from the movie because they were deemed too suggestive.

"When I first heard the score, I was

Mark Isham

blown away by the fact that something distinctly American came on the screen," Goldsmith remarked. "Up until that time, the film music of Max Steiner and others was dominated by the Viennese School or Ravel. Even Copland's scores *(The Heiress)* never used contemporary jazz and orchestra in such a dissonant, rhythmically and contrapuntally involved manner. He did more than use a jazz combo, it was really the first *jazz score* with strings. Some said it was *The Man with the Golden Arm* or *The Wild One*, but Alex was the first."

Jerry Goldsmith and The National Philharmonic Orchestra (photo by Matthew Peak)

"When I heard the intimate way he got inside of the characters and worked with the dialog, I knew the doors were now wide open to do whatever you wanted to in a score." Goldsmith, who was Alex North's best friend, also conducted and recorded North's score for *2001*, which was composed for but never used by Stanley Kubrick.

Goldsmith is planning to record his own 'best of' anthology CD, due for release early in 1997 from Varese Sarabande. "The problem is, what do you include?" Goldsmith queried. "If I use *Patton*, *Patch of Blue*, or my favorite jazz score, *Russia House*, what do I leave off? *Basic Instinct*, which was one of my favorite scores, was so beautifully edited that the music practically wrote itself. Film, after all, is a rhythmic medium—the images go through the projector at twenty-four frames a second."

Angelo Badalamenti's strong ties to the jazz community are not only apparent in *Twin Peaks*, where he featured vibist Jay Hoggard, Buster Williams, and Grady Tate, but also in David Lynch's newest film, *Lost Highway*, where he, Billy Childs, Ron Sheppard, and Bill Pullman recorded the 'cool,' spacy soundtrack in a three-hour session, recorded live, with no overdubs, but a hell of a lot of interplay.

On *Blue Velvet*, his first collaboration with Lynch, he was hired to convert Isabella Rossellini into a torch singer who could deliver the movie's central ballad. Lynch was so impressed with Angelo's coaching job ("It was easy, we were both Italian," Angelo explained), that he became Lynch's 'main man' and godfather to his son.

Badalamenti often worked in a unique way with Lynch, underscoring effects like the lighting of a match in *Wild at Heart*. "The effect was designed to be almost subliminal," Angelo commented. "Viewers feel the goosebumps before they hear it."

It was through his association with Lynch that Badalamenti met Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro *(Delicatessen)*, who handed him his most ambitious project to date, *City of Lost Children*. In this film, an adult cautionary tale about a world where adults can clone but not dream, he uses a wider range of orchestration than ever before. Among the myriad of motifs is a love theme for the nine-year-old heroine, which Marianne Faithful performs over the end titles, and a theme for an organ grinder, whose melodies bring out homicidal tendencies in those injected by his pet flea with a viscous green liquid. His favorite score? "I love the one I'm with. No matter how many films I score, when I see it all come together on the screen, it blows me away."

There is much debate as to whether movie scores rank with 'serious' musical compositions of our time. James Horner feels that as the NEA gradually disintegrates, the performance of avant-garde works in major halls is over, and the cinema is where these composers must now turn. Composer Graeme Revell, one of Jerry Goldsmith's biggest fans, would love to see him go beyond his movie scoring. There are, however, unique compositional opportunities open to cinemascorers who seek them out.

In addition to the rave reviews Elliot Goldenthal *(Heat* and the upcoming *Robin and Batman)*, is receiving for *Fire Water Paper*, his mammoth choral and orchestral work with cellist Yo Yo Ma, Goldenthal should also get special consideration around Oscar time for his exceptional work on *A Time to Kill* and *Michael Collins*, an epic tale about the famous Irish revolutionary directed by Neil Jordan.

Goldenthal's training with Aaron Copland and John Corigliano *(Altered States)* prepared him for the task. "Copland would sit down at the piano and play through his scores very slowly, stopping to explain any harmonic or rhythmic changes I inquired about. I had the good fortune to be with John, who was my 'formal' instructor, at a time he was developing into a major composer."

In the suspenseful *A Time to Kill*, Goldenthal, like Bernard Herrmann *(Psycho)* before him, is a master at using orchestration and odd harmonies to cover the emotional landscape of love and murder. To depict the opening rape scene, Goldenthal uses orchestral bursts and a plaintive, screaming saxophone, which he alternates with tender themes and spirituals to reflect the innocence of a child and the love between a father and his family. The openness which Corigliano ("Hallucinations for Orchestra") encouraged in orchestration can be heard in Goldenthal's score for *A Time to Kill*, in which the spiritual "Precious Lord" collides with menacing string harmonies, as the Ku Klux Klan attempts to commit murder and mayhem on the righteous citizens of the town.

In his 1996 score for *Bed of Roses* (released on a High Definition CD) as well as *Mother Night*, Michael Convertino displays a special harmonic talent which goes beyond standard techniques of composition (variations on a theme) and orchestration. (Some of Convertino's finest work, including *Queen of Hearts* and *Things To Do In Denver When You're Dead*, never made it to the record stores because of new use fees and, in the case of *Things To Do In Denver*, the film's lack of success.)

Angelo Badalamenti

The *Bed of Roses* soundtrack succeeds in communicating the fertile possibilities of love in the arid landscape of big business far better than the film itself. "When it works properly, it's like the interchange in an opera, not only between music and dialog but also between elements within the orchestra," Convertino explained. He often uses the orchestra as a pedal (sustaining note or figure) while he sets up a musical correspondence with a piano and string section. Shying away from standard resolution, he often has a gorgeous passage pass through and then disappear, like the Lone Ranger, who performs beautifully and then, without a word of explanation, rides off into the sunset.

To attain the lofty position which Badalamenti, Horner, and Goldsmith occupy, in which they can choose what type of film to work on, one must relate to more than just the printed page, as Convertino explained. "Scoring is not only about the music and its integration into the film—dealing with the mood of the scene, the arc or shape of the picture, drawing the emotions of the characters—but also about how one deals with people—the director, producer, studio, etc.—who are under stress or in sensitive situations, who are trying to convey musical ideas to you in nonmusical terms."

These people include creative directors like Michael Mann *(Heat)*, who drive composers and mixers to distraction with the continuous changes (micro-managing) they make throughout the dubbing period, which can run six to eight weeks. The director is often so familiar with the dialog in the movie that he doesn't realize that those final touches he makes in the mix may obscure what he most wants to communicate.

Directors can also wear a white hat. Terence Blanchard *(Malcolm X* and *Clockers)* feels that without his relationship to Spike Lee he would never have been able to gain experience as a film composer or been able to express his personal musical vision in films such as *Malcolm X* or *Get On the Bus*.

Ryuichi Sakamoto *(The Last Emperor)* found acting in Bernardo Bertolucci's films provided him a unique insight into scoring. "Acting in Bernardo's films allowed me to get into the subject and the right mood before I began composing the score. Being on the set with Bertolucci, I learned how he sees the film and deals with the frame, something which allowed me to better coordinate my composition with his vision."

Like actors, the biggest hurdle most composers must overcome is typecasting. John Williams *(Star Wars)* is still regarded as a composer who can deal only with blockbusters, despite the tender 'ethnic' theme he wrote for *Schindler's List*, just as Terence Blanchard is pegged as a 'jazz' composer, despite evidence to the contrary, such as his scores for *Malcom X* and *Clockers*, which were almost entirely orchestral. Still, when queried, none of the composers I spoke to would dream of doing anything else. ■