Raymond Scott: Accidental Music for Animated Mayhem

by IRWIN CHUSID

His merry melodies are genetically encoded in every earthling. Since 1943, they've been heard underscoring the antics of Bugs, Daffy, Porky, and Elmer. In the early 1990s, his eccentric recordings provided counterpoint to the body-fluid fetishism of Nickelodeon's *The Ren & Stimpy Show.* His musical themes echoed across national television during 1967 in a now-forgotten cartoon parody called *Batfink*, directed and produced by Hal Seeger (of *Popeye* fame). In addition, *The Simpsons*, *Animaniacs*, *Duckman,* and *The Oblongs* have joined the cavalcade of animated programs that adapted his riffs. And if any further link were necessary to cement this legacy, his composition "Powerhouse" has been deployed as a round-the-clock "audio logo" on Turner Broadcasting's Cartoon Network since May 1998.

Surprisingly, however, composer Raymond Scott never wrote a note of music for a cartoon in his life. According to his widow, Mitzi, he never even watched the Saturday morning offerings. Scott seemed oblivious to the fact that generations of video-glazed adolescents have been absentmindedly humming his themes, all immortalized in an art form which he cared little about—if at all.

Scott's programmatic late 1930s novelty jazz instrumentals included such titles as "New Year's Eve in a Haunted House," "War Dance for Wooden Indians," "Reckless Night on Board an Ocean Liner," "Celebration on the Planet Mars," and "Egyptian Barn Dance"—all of which evoke comic imagery. But Scott had more important things to do than concoct musical flavorings for the misadventures of a wascally wabbit, a crime-fighting bat, and a short-fused asthmatic Chihuahua.

Raymond Scott in 1937. Courtesy of the Raymond Scott Archives.

Raymond Scott was born Harry Warnow, on September 10, 1908, in Brooklyn. He was a piano prodigy with an instinctive flair for science. Over the course of his career, he led two lives: as a pianist/composer/bandleader, and as an engineer/inventor/electronic music pioneer. From 1937 to 1939, he led the quirky Raymond Scott Quintette (actually a sextet, but Scott avoided the latter designation, claiming he wanted audiences to keep their minds on the music). Sporting a lineup of clarinet, trumpet, tenor sax, drums, bass, and Scott on piano, the RSQ was immensely popular on radio and the concert stage and in film. It was difficult to categorize, drawing on jazz, pop, classical, ethnic, and musique concrète elements. Although the RSQ sold millions of 78-rpm records, it was not highly regarded by hot-music purists, one of whom dismissed its oeuvre as "screwy, kittenish pseudo-jazz." (These three-minute pop masterpieces were reissued by Columbia in 1992 on *The Music of Raymond Scott: Reckless Nights and Turkish Twilights*, a compilation produced by the author; in 1999 the collection was remastered for release on Sony Legacy.) Scott later led a renowned big band, scored a Broadway musical (*Lute Song*),

composed for ballet and film, and led the studio orchestra on NBC's popular chart-countdown television show, *Your Hit Parade*, from 1950 to 1957.

Never a "people person," Scott was more at home with machines (his first wife, Pearl, recalled that Scott walked out of his own wedding reception to return to work in the studio). Many of his compositions reflected a preoccupation with technology: "Powerhouse," "Oil Gusher," "Girl at the Typewriter," and "Love Song to a Microphone." He rehearsed his sidemen relentlessly (said disgruntled trumpeter Charlie Shavers, "I think he just liked to hear the band"),

Scott in 1938. Courtesy of the Raymond Scott Archives.

demanding superhuman perfection. He was often derided as a bully or a taskmaster. "All he ever had was machines—only we had names," remarked his drummer, Johnny Williams. Singer Anita O'Day, who vocalized briefly with Scott's early 1940s big band, called him "a martinet" who "reduced [musicians] to something like windup toys."

Having risen to prominence during the Swing Era of the 1930s, Scott kept pace with subsequent developments in music technology. He invented electronic sound generators, and in the mid-1950s was one of the first musicians to compose and record all-electronic jingles for TV and radio commercials. He later invented an instantaneous composition-performance console called the Electronium. It was Beethoven-in-a-box, a monstrosity that composed using artificial intelligence. In 1969, Motown impresario Berry Gordy was sufficiently impressed to place an order for the device, and later hired Scott to head the label's division of electronic research and development. (Scott retired from the position in 1977.) He was composing on a home-rigged MIDI system as late as 1987. That year, he suffered the first of six strokes, which left him unable to work and severely damaged his speech. He lived out his remaining years in obscurity and near-destitution at his and Mitzi's home in Van Nuys, California. He died on February 8, 1994, at a nursing home in North Hills.

Scott's cartoon legacy began unwittingly (from Scott's standpoint) when he sold his music copyrights, vested in Circle Music Publications, to the Warner Bros.-owned Advanced Music Corporation, on February 15, 1943. This accorded Warner Bros. music director Carl Stalling carte blanche to sprinkle Scott's melodies—particularly those composed from 1936 to 1939—into the highly seasoned musical gumbo that underscored Bugs's and Daffy's high jinks. Scott's "Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals," originally recorded in 1937 by the Quintette, was quoted three times by Stalling in the Friz Freleng-directed *Greetings Bait*, released May 15, 1943. (The quotes were six, eighteen, and nine seconds in duration, respectively.) Eventually, about 120 Warner Bros. cartoons, including some late 1980s episodes directed by Greg Ford, employed Scott melodies (Ford's soundtracks recycled Stalling recordings, albeit in new settings). Scott's most recognizable title, "Powerhouse," was adapted in over forty features. (A complete index of cartoon series usages of Scott is posted at www.raymondscott.com.) New placements of Scott melodies in Warner Bros. cartoons ceased in the early 1960s, when Scott's domestic copyrights reverted to the composer. He subsequently sold this catalog to Music Sales Corporation.

(Historically, Stalling was not the first to cast a Scott theme in an animated setting. Two years before *Greetings Bait*, George Pal enlisted Scott's "The Toy Trumpet" as the soundtrack for *Rhythm in the Ranks*, part of his Puppetoons series, produced for Paramount. Puppetoons, however, were not cartoons—they were films consisting of single-frame photographs, or stop-motion animation, of wooden puppets.)

In licensing Scott works for cartoons, Warner Bros. companies, though operating under the same corporate umbrella, acted somewhat autonomously, albeit cooperatively. The Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., division obtained synchronization licenses from—and paid fees to—Advanced Music Corporation for the animated adaptation of each Scott title on an incident-per-cartoon basis. The going rate in the mid-1940s was a twenty-five dollar flat fee per usage (each distinct "needle drop" within a feature), a rate that increased to fifty dollars by the end of the decade. Scott, as writer, would have received 50 percent of this one-time publishing revenue.

Scott's most familiar and oft-quoted tune was "Powerhouse," which contains two distinct, unrelated sections, often referred to as "Powerhouse A" and "Powerhouse B": the frantic "A" passage evokes a coyote-chasing-roadrunner melee; the slower, ominous "B" passage suggests a menacing assembly line-gone-haywire (most famously employed in the conveyor belt scenes in Bob Clampett's *Baby Bottleneck*, 1946). Other Scott titles quoted in Warner Bros. productions were "The Penguin," "Twilight in Turkey," "Huckleberry Duck," "The Toy Trumpet," "Siberian Sleigh Ride," "Reckless Night on Board an Ocean Liner," "Singing Down the Road," "War Dance for Wooden Indians," "Egyptian Barn Dance," "The Happy Farmer," "In an 18th Century Drawing Room," "Boy Scout in Switzerland," and "Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals." Some titles, such as "The Penguin" and "Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals," were used in over a dozen features, while others were used only once. "Egyptian Barn Dance" was employed only in the opening credits to Chuck Jones's 1953 outer-spacecapade, *Duck Dodgers in the 24½th Century*.

The amount of Scott material in any Warner Bros. cartoon is typically overstated. Since the Scott revival began in the early 1990s, many journalists have mistakenly attributed to Scott composer credit for *all* Warner Bros. cartoon scores, or for *the majority* of music heard underscoring *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies*. In fact, most of the music heard in Warner Bros. features was composed by Carl Stalling, who also drew on operatic motifs, classical

warhorses, public domain folk tunes, and copyrighted Tin Pan Alley standards (the latter, to no one's surprise, were owned by Warner publishing interests). In the case of Scott titles, Stalling's orchestral settings of compositions, originally written for and performed by a six-piece ersatz-jazz ensemble, were Wagnerian in scope, greatly exceeding Scott's ambitions. The scores were precisely pegged to on-screen action, and it's difficult to envision the explosive impact of these classic cartoons without Stalling's musical underpinnings. Since animation in the 1940s and '50s was largely regarded as a juvenile entertainment medium, however, it's doubtful Scott felt pride in—if he even cared about—this use of his work. Mitzi Scott, his third wife, whom Raymond married in 1967, said that her husband rarely watched television, and "never, never" cartoons. There exists but one public acknowledgement by Scott of his cartoon "legacy"—it occurred in 1985, during his last recorded interview, and the composer seemed disinterested in the topic. No historic journalistic references to the Scott-Stalling link have surfaced. Stalling was interviewed once during his life, years after retirement, and did not mention Scott.

Yet, in retrospect, Scott's early ensemble embodied classic animation soundtrack fodder. Drummer Johnny Williams's .45-caliber rimshots were guaranteed to make Yosemite Sam dance; his artillery included cowbells, bouncy tom-toms, and wake-the-neighbors cymbal crashes. Muted horns imitated toy trumpets, howling spooks, and drunken seafarers. Scott's idiosyncratic compositions toodled along at Keystone Kop tempos, interrupted by hairpin-turn rhythmic shifts and over-the-cliff dynamic spirals. His catchy melodies evoked Turkish casbahs, alpine echoes, oil gushers, typewriters, moon rockets, and robots. Jennifer Harper of the *Washington Times* described it as "music for mice that get hit in the head with an ironing board."

Scott wasn't the only bandleader/composer in the 1930s and '40s known for wacky titles and picturesque "novelty jazz." Such contemporaries as Reginald Foresythe ("Serenade to a Wealthy Widow"), John Kirby ("Rehearsin' for a Nervous Breakdown"), Ambrose ("Dance of the Potted Puppet"), Claude Thornhill ("Portrait of a Guinea Farm"), and Alec Templeton ("Mendelssohn Mows 'Em Down") recorded music that, looking back, has many of the same humorous, retro-cartoonish qualities. Did Scott's catalog come to embody the Golden Age of animation because of a mere business transaction? If only we had Carl Stalling around to offer an opinion. It's true that Scott, despite his insistent "purity" of performance, was by critical consensus less of a jazz "purist" than many of his contemporaries. Perhaps his music was deemed less

"sacred" and, hence, more suitable for adaptation to what many considered a frivolous medium. Scott was a workhorse and a classically trained music scholar, but he was not without a sense of the absurd and a penchant for mischief. Journalist Carleton Smith in 1941 referred to him as "the Gertrude Stein of Dada Jazz." It's possible that, given a choice, Scott might have prohibited such "bastardization" of his compositions. But by selling his publishing interests, he relinquished any such control. The historical outcome bespeaks a paradoxical co(s)mic justice: this immensely complex, demanding body of work—composed by a perfection-gripped drill sergeant who couldn't tolerate mistakes—was ultimately used to underscore mayhem, madness, and loss of control.

Scott's animation legacy was furthered in 1967—again, as in the Warner Bros. films, without his involvement, endorsement, or concern. The popular *Batman* TV series sparked a caped crusader craze, which inspired a color cartoon parody called *Batfink*. Batfink was a pointy-eared crime fighter, with wings of steel and supersonic sonar, who tackled ruthless criminals with the aid of his Japanese sidekick, Karate. One hundred five-minute installments were produced for Columbia/Screen Gems by Hal Seeger (a legendary animator who had worked for Max Fleischer, Paramount, and Famous Studios; he produced *Popeye, Out of the Inkwell*, *Milton the Monster,* and *Fearless Fly*). Forty-six episodes included quotes from five Scott tunes: "Powerhouse," "The Toy Trumpet," "Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals," "Minuet in Jazz," and "Tia Juana." The show's music director was a craftsman many consider second only to Stalling in the annals of tunes for 'toons: Winston Sharples. A longtime music director for Paramount, Sharples (who died in 1977) wrote themes and scores for *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, *Felix the Cat*, and *Little Lulu*, and composed soundtracks for *Superman* and *Popeye*, among others.

When the producers of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* licensed Scott's Columbia recordings for their series in August 1992, they were fully aware that Scott's screwball pop was embedded in the musical montages created by Stalling for the cartoons which had mesmerized them since childhood. "Nowadays, people think that all the music in Warner cartoons is Raymond Scott," noted John Kricfalusi, creator of *Ren & Stimpy.* "There isn't actually that much, but it's so powerful, that hearing eight bars in a seven-minute cartoon, it's what you walk away remembering." Henry Porch, music coordinator for Spümcø, the original producers of *Ren & Stimpy*, wrote in *Spin* magazine that Scott's music "*screamed* animation." Porch observed that "*Ren*

& Stimpy dealt with abruptly changing emotions and attitudes, and Scott's music easily kept up, shifting gears at breakneck pace." Bob Camp, the show's creative director, confessed, "I put it on a lot when I'm drawing to put me in the cartoon mood." Kricfalusi felt that "Raymond had a cartoon sensibility, and a great sense of humor. If you could say there's color in music, Scott's pieces have a wild sense of color, just like cartoons."

Scott music was employed in twelve *Ren & Stimpy* episodes. The usages were awkward, if well-intentioned. Because they were not custom-arranged to underscore specific action, they could not synchronize on a dime as did Stalling's. The mood match was generally appropriate, however, and the use of Scott's work lent a classic air to the brutish bedlam of *Ren & Stimpy*. Titles featured were "Manhattan Minuet," "Powerhouse," "In an 18th Century Drawing Room," "Twilight in Turkey," "War Dance for Wooden Indians," "The Toy Trumpet," "At an Arabian House Party," and "Huckleberry Duck." One additional episode, the unaired "Man's Best Friend," reportedly rejected by Nickelodeon because of violence deemed unsuitable for young viewers, used four Scott recordings ("In an 18th Century Drawing Room," "Moment Musical," "Twilight in Turkey," and "New Year's Eve in a Haunted House").

"Powerhouse" has been quoted in four other syndicated cartoon series: *The Simpsons* ("And Maggie Makes Three," 1995); *Duckman* ("Aged Heat 2: Women in Heat," 1996); *George Shrinks* (TVO, Canada, 2001); and *Animaniacs* ("Toy Shop Terror," 1993), the last a Warner Bros. property strictly for the tooth-fairy set. In fact, the entire four-minute "Toy Shop Terror" was animated around Richard Stone's brilliant, Spike Jones–inflected arrangement of the complete "Powerhouse" (a feat Stalling never attempted). "It's a strangely wonderful piece of music," Stone told a BBC interviewer in 1996. "It's like it was written on Mars." Conducting it was a heavenly experience for Stone. "I must tell you," he confessed, "the opportunity of standing in front of forty pieces and hearing them play 'Powerhouse' was better than sex. It was the greatest moment in my entire life."

Two additional animated usages of Scott material hit TV screens around the turn of the century. In 1998, *The Drew Carey Show* used a brief excerpt from "Powerhouse" in a short animated/live action segment intended to evoke a vintage Warner Bros. mood. And in 2001, *The Oblongs* used an excerpt of the Raymond Scott Quintette's recording of "The Penguin" in an episode entitled "Narcoleptic Scottie." The melody underscored a scene in which a comatose pooch sprang to life and scampered around the yard.

The Cartoon Network has made "Powerhouse" the melody most readily associated with TV animation. The network's countless variations of the composition's two distinct melodies air at least half a dozen times each hour, to promote such programs as *Popeye*, *The Jetsons*, *Tom and Jerry*, *The Flintstones*, *Alvin and the Chipmunks*, *The Huckleberry Hound Show*, *The Pink Panther*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Top Cat*, *Speed Racer*, *Underdog*, *Batman*, *Taz-Mania*, *Johnny Quest*, *Cow and Chicken*, *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Two Stupid Dogs*, *Johnny Bravo*, *Freakazoid!*, *Beetlejuice*, *The Addams Family*, and others. A 1999 Cartoon Network "greatest hits" CD, *Cartoon Medley* (Kid Rhino 75693), begins and ends with, respectively, short and long versions of "Powerhouse."

One is tempted to address the peculiar appeal of Scott's music to generations of youngsters. All these serenades in the service of—cel-propelled babysitting? It could be maintained that Scott's music appealed to children *because he was one.* Some of the greatest writers and artists of children's literature (including Dr. Seuss, Lewis Carroll, Maurice Sendak) did not have children of their own. They were the mischievous, weirdo uncles ("You have 'em, I'll amuse 'em," said the chain-smoking Dr. Seuss), inclined to incite tots into a frenzy, leaving parents to calm down their little Damiens. Scott, however, had four children (Carolyn and Stanley, by his first wife, Pearl, and Deborah and Elizabeth, by his second wife, singer Dorothy Collins). While not a "people-person," he was probably even less child-oriented. Speaking with his offspring, one gets the impression that Scott generally conceded child-rearing duties to his spouse. He unquestionably loved his children, but seemed to prefer the audio lab to the family playroom. Scott was, in some respects, an overgrown adolescent—self-absorbed, irresponsible, unwilling to cooperate. He likely suffered from what we now call Attention Deficit Disorder: he'd commence a dozen projects, finish one, and start a dozen more, most of which would be abandoned, ad infinitum. Work, to him, was a form of play, but it was not a diversion that involved real children. Hence, the isolation from his family, and his preference for spending time with other "big kids" who shared his technical obsessions. In the early 1960s, he recorded *Soothing Sounds for Baby*, a three-LP series of electronic lullabies (available on CD: Basta 309064 /-65 /-66) geared for infants during their first eighteen months of life. But one shouldn't assume from the existence of these records that Scott actually cared about babies; *Soothing Sounds* seems to have been yet another creative composing and recording challenge, this one commissioned by the Gesell Institute of Child Development. The liner notes refer to Scott as "one of America's

most versatile composers," citing the Quintette, his electronic commercial soundtracks, *Lute Song*, and television scoring—all work for "adults." But the notes make no claim that Scott had any particular expertise in the field of child psychology—and they didn't mention cartoons.

Scott's animation legacy has extended to commercials, for Lucky Strike cigarettes ("Be Happy, Go Lucky," 1953); County Fair Bread (featuring an original electronic score, 1962); the Canadian music video channel Much Music ("Boy Scout in Switzerland," 1992); and Hasbro/Cartoon Network's "Great Crate!" ("Powerhouse," 1997). In addition, a 1966 animated (but non-cartoon) short by Jim Henson, entitled "Limbo," featured a musique concrète soundtrack by Scott, who collaborated on several other short-form, pre-*Sesame Street* projects with Henson. The County Fair Bread and Henson soundtracks can be heard on the 2-CD set *Manhattan Research, Inc.* (Basta 3090782).

Scott did not live long enough to see the revival of his music reach full flower. He would have been surprised to know that, despite his pioneering electronic achievements, novelty jazz repertoire, big band catalog, and theatrical and film credits, his modern reputation rests on providing musical counterpoint for someone handing a stick of dynamite to a duck. As John Corbett noted in the *Chicago Reader*, "Quirky, memorable [Scott] themes like 'Powerhouse' in Warner Bros. cartoons arguably helped shape the post-war musical aesthetic as much as anything Elvis or the Beatles did."

For more information on Scott's career and work, visit the Raymond Scott Archives at www.raymondscott.com.