Tunes for Toons: A Cartoon Music Primer

by NEIL STRAUSS

"If you can write for animation," said Hoyt Curtin, composer for classic Hanna-Barbera cartoons from *The Flintstones* to *Scooby-Doo*, "you can write for anything." Cartoon music is among the most engaging and experimental forms of twentieth-century music, exploring the more outrageous extremes of instrumentation, rhythm, and nonmusical sound. It is a genre in which rapid tempo changes, unusual instrumental effects, experimental percussion, postmodern quotation, shock chords, and musical genre-shifting are de rigeur. From the warped takes on Liszt and Rossini that occur when a fly lands on a conductor's nose to the free-jazz solos that certain animated animals play on the heads of other animated animals, the laughs lie in perverting the sounds we've come to expect from concerts and canines. Just try watching a classic *Tom and Jerry* or *Bugs Bunny* cartoon with the sound off, and see how flat the jokes fall.

The history of this music has rarely been told, for the sole reason that it wasn't until recently that cartoon music was even considered a viable genre unto itself. Cartoon music, for the purposes of this primer, is score—orchestral or instrumental accompaniment—as opposed to the circle-of-life songs of Disney films, the pop hits that fill some big-budget film features, and the tongue-in-cheek parodies that populate *The Simpsons*. Born in the 1920s, cartoon music experienced its golden years in the 1940s and '50s, before television studios increased the workload, lowered the budget, and, with the advent of synthesizers, eviscerated the art.

Interestingly, many of the more modern avant-garde musicians who have been drawn to cartoon music, like John Zorn and Sun Ra, have their roots in improvisation. This makes sense, because many of the early composers for cartoons started out as improvisers themselves, playing organ and other instruments to accompany silent movies.

Perhaps one of the most important chance meetings in cartoon music history occurred in the early 1920s at the Isis Theatre in Kansas City, where Carl Stalling, then a film accompanist and conductor, first encountered Walt Disney, who was just beginning his involvement in film. After Disney left for Hollywood and began producing cartoons, the two renewed their bond (originally created over their shared excitement about combining music and film) and Stalling was soon given the first two silent Mickey Mouse shorts to score. The job was a perfect fit for the wildly talented Stalling, and he was quickly hired as the studio's first music director.

In the meantime, Max Fleischer at Fleischer Studios was experimenting on a more in-depth level with adding music to cartoons. The studio's "Song Car-Tune," *Oh Mabel* (1924), introduced the infamous bouncing ball, which landed on the appropriate lyric to a popular song in time to the music (which was played by the theater accompanist) for audiences to sing along to. The "car-tune" received such an enthusiastic response at its first screening that the theater manager rewound the short and showed it again. A few shorts later, Max Fleischer was introduced to Lee de Forest, who had developed Phonofilm, a method of recording sound on the edge of motion picture film. (Incidentally, the instructional film on the use of Phonofilm was animated. Thus cartoons played an integral part in the advent of sound in film). Fleischer fell in love with the idea and produced the first theatrical film of any kind with a synchronized soundtrack, *My Old Kentucky Home*, in 1926. Subsequently, he added sound to his earlier bouncing-ball films, many of which featured Koko the Clown. These were the first theatrical releases of sound films, predating even Warner Bros.' first live-action motion picture with a music track, *Don Juan* (which preceded 1927's more famous *Jazz Singer* by more than a year).

Even Paul Terry's Terrytoons studio beat Disney to sound with its first Aesop's Fables series film, *Dinner Time* (1928). Terrytoons claimed to be the first studio to prescore its cartoons. Working with brilliant Terrytoons composer Philip A. Scheib, the studio's animators drew frames to fit his scores, which were recorded in one take.

The advent of sound solved a problem that plagued composer Paul Hindemith, a *Felix the Cat* fanatic who composed a score for *Felix at the Circus*, which he attempted to premiere at the Baden-Baden festival. Much to his chagrin, the machine selected to synchronize his pianola roll with the film projector malfunctioned and the composition was subsequently lost.

Determined to keep up with the competition, Walt Disney traveled to New York to work on his first actual sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*. At Cinephone studios in 1928, the well-known New York film accompanist Carl Edouarde conducted the score. Sound effects, music, and dialogue all had to be recorded on one track, without mistakes. Any missed cue or unwanted sound meant starting over from the beginning. To keep the beat, the orchestra played to visual cues inked onto the cartoon's print. The synchronization process was so long and laborious that Disney was forced to sell his car in order to pay the musicians overtime.

With Stalling at his side, however, Disney eventually streamlined and updated the sound process, creating innovative Silly Symphonies, which were pre-scored animated shorts choreographed to well-known classical works. His first was *The Skeleton Dance* (1929). The close synchronization between music and on-screen movement popularized by this and earlier shorts came to be known as "mickey mousing." Disney's quirky transpositions of classical works would later reach their height with *Fantasia* (1940), which thrilled Disney to no end by making, in his words, "strange bedfellows" of Bach, Beethoven, and Mickey Mouse.

At Disney, Stalling also invented a tick system for synchronizing music to visuals. It was a forerunner to the click track, now the standard process in both live-action and animated features. One of the first click tracks, a reel of unexposed film with holes punched out to make clicks and pops when the film was run on the sound head, was devised by Disney sound effects man Jim Macdonald and used in *The Skeleton Dance*.

To avoid copyright infringements, musical directors at these studios culled their non-original music from either songs in the public domain or songs from their studio's musicals. The cartoon studio at Warner Bros. was actually created as a vehicle for promoting its musicals' songs, with management originally requiring every cartoon produced there to use a popular song from a Warner Bros. feature. Two ex-Disney animators, Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising (along with producer Leon Schlesinger), convinced Warner Bros. to start a cartoon studio and began directing Looney Tunes in 1930, with Merrie Melodies following a year later. (Even their directorial credit was a musical pun—"Harman-Ising" or *harmonizing*). Frank Marsales was the original musical director for these, followed by Norman Spencer, Bernard Brown, and then, in 1936, Carl Stalling, fresh from Disney and Ub Iwerks cartoon studios. Stalling

remained at Warner Bros. for twenty-two years, scoring over 600 cartoons at the rate of one every eight days.

His working process was fascinating, showing the careful attention to music with which each cartoon was drawn. Before animation, he met with a cartoon's director in order to set the time signatures to which the short was to be drawn. Instead of counting in beats per measure or beats per minute, cartoon animators counted in frames per beat. After animation, Stalling received either the animator's exposure sheets or bar sheets, which broke the animation, dialogue, and sound effects into musical bars for Stalling to score from. For his compositions, Stalling employed musical puns by using popular songs whose titles fit on-screen gags, sometimes for no more than four seconds. This came naturally to Stalling who, as John Zorn puts it, "had an Ivesian sense of quotation."

Often, themes from Warner Bros. live-action films would be played for under four seconds before mutating into an original Stalling piece. The average cue (the unedited period between the commencement and end of a single musical take) was at most two minutes, and at the lower end of the spectrum, two seconds. Most of Stalling's scores were a weighty 500 measures comprised of ten sections, all performed by the Warner Bros. fifty-piece orchestra, who were challenged and taxed far more than they were when they performed undemanding scores for some of Warner Bros. feature live-action films. The opening sequence for most Merrie Melodies was a Warner Bros.–owned tune called "Merrily We Roll Along," with an electric guitar providing the initial sound effect as the Warner Bros. logo catapults forward on the screen. (For the Looney Tunes, a jaunty minor hit, "The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down," by the Tin Pan Alley team of Friend and Franklin was used.)

Stalling's work called to mind composers who had a cartoon sensibility and composed with visual images in mind—from Claude Debussy to jazz stylists like Zez Confrey, Red Norvell, Spike Jones, John Kirby, and, especially, Raymond Scott. Stalling relied so heavily on the 1930s music of Scott, particularly the fast and wacky "Powerhouse" theme that accompanied so many conveyor-belt and chase scenes, that Scott is often considered a cartoon composer himself, although he never intended his highly visual and idiosyncratic swing-based pieces to be used as such. In a decade of big bands, of Benny Goodman and "One O'Clock Jump," when the world was not just on the verge of war but Glenn Miller, Scott wasn't afraid to break every existing rule to make pop music. He put together a small swing band that didn't really

swing, kept all his music in his head instead of on charts, worked at tempos more mechanical than human, flirted with the avant-garde, and, above all, maintained a deep, profound sense of humor, especially toward so-called serious music. His songs came from the idiosyncratic mind of an idiosyncratic man, with highly suggestive titles like "Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals" and "Confusion Among a Fleet of Taxicabs Upon Meeting with a Fare." "It was so different," explained original Raymond Scott Quintette saxophonist Dave Harris. "That's why it took off so. People, they didn't know what the hell to make of the Quintette. When you told people you were with the Quintette, they'd look at you like 'where the hell did you come from?' They thought we came from another world."

Milt Franklyn replaced Stalling when he retired in 1958, having already worked as Stalling's arranger for years. He was followed by William Lava in the early 1960s. Though Lava's scores were not as polished as Stalling's, he did add other musical influences, such as world music, to the cartoons. Serving as musical copyist and occasional orchestrator during and after the Stalling years was Eugene Poddany, who later directed the music for a number of Ted Geisel (or Dr. Seuss) classics, which were directed by Chuck Jones. Treg Brown was in charge of the sound effects for the cartoons under all of these composers. Sound effects people like Brown became, in many ways, an adjunct to the cartoon composition process, though there were often battles for whether on-screen action would be accompanied by a musical or sound-effect cue. Like Stalling, Brown was an innovator, often using a sound that was entirely incongruous with the on-screen image, forcing the eye and the ear to send comically contradictory information to the brain.

Besides Stalling, the other giant of cartoon music was Scott Bradley, the self-taught composer at MGM's cartoon studios. With the sound turned off, the jokes in an orchestrated sequence of *Tom and Jerry* fall flat; Bradley's harsh dissonances and move-for-move orchestration bring them to life. With a greater passion for modernism than his predecessors, Bradley's musical sources ranged from wild jazz to twelve-tone rows and musical clusters. "I hope Dr. Schoenberg will forgive me for using his system to produce funny music," he once said, "but even the boys in the orchestra laughed when we were recording it."

In MGM's academy award winning *Cat Concerto* (1947), cartoon cat Tom's piano fingerings exactly follow Bradley's notation of a Liszt Rhapsody arranged for, and recorded by, two pianists. Even Tom's finger and wrist move-

ments are modeled after those of the late pianist Vladimir de Pachman—though the feline virtuoso somehow performs music scored for four human hands. "I wish that our contemporary masters would take interest in cartoon work," Bradley said. "For men like Copland, Bernstein, Britten, Walton, Kodaly, Shostakovich, or Prokofiev, it would be a very fruitful experience."

In a post–John Cage world, in which all sound can be considered music, the sonic possibilities are even greater. In UPA's Gerald McBoing Boing series, scored by Gail Kubik and based on the innovative Dr. Suess children's story, Gerald cannot talk; he can only utter sound effects. The score calls for a narrator, a chamber orchestra, and an imaginative array of percussion instruments. In *Gerald McBoing Boing's Symphony* (1953), Gerald fills in for an entire symphony orchestra in their absence.

At Walter Lantz Studios, home of Woody Woodpecker and Andy Panda, Darrell Calker was doing all the innovation. He was well known in jazz circles and often brought in the likes of Nat King Cole and Meade Lux Lewis to play for Lantz's "Swing Symphonies." Other noteworthy musical directors of the era included Winston Sharples, an innovator responsible for the themes and scores of Felix the Cat, Little Lulu, Casper the Friendly Ghost, and more at Van Buren, Famous, and Paramount Studios; Sammy Timberg and Sammy Lerner at Fleischer studios; Gene Rodemich at Van Beuren Studios; Joe De Nat at Columbia/Screen Gems; and Oliver Wallace, Frank Churchill, Leigh Harline, and others at Disney.

The death knell of the golden age of cartoon music came in the late 1950s, when UPA, MGM, and other studios halted cartoon production and a musician's strike forced studios to use library music from past cartoons, starting a bad habit that plagues today's cartoons. In addition, the large-volume demands of television in the late 1950s forced other studios to put out cheap and hurried work.

When Hanna-Barbera opened its studio after the demise of MGM, the founders called Hoyt Curtin, an aspiring film composer whom they had met while working on a beer commercial, to do some musical spots over the phone. Impressed by Curtin's gift for coming up with hummable melodies in minutes, the pair hired him as the studio's chief composer, and soon he was busy recording three times a week. Due to time and budget constraints, and also due to directors' attempts at modernization, Curtin sometimes had to use all synthesizer cues, "which don't swing," as he said. He scored everything from the big-band-style theme songs of *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* to more

sedate cartoons like *The Smurfs*. His scores for the *Superfriends* shows created the type of hero music that has become standard fare for the robot and action cartoons that began to dominate Saturday mornings in the late 1980s and '90s; while, in *Jonny Quest*, he turned almost sadistic, writing it in "a killer key," as he says, with the hardest fingering positions he could. "Just murder," is how he describes the experience of playing it. According to Curtin, "Every current Saturday morning cartoon has stolen from me musically."

Another musician who didn't conform to television's low standards was Vince Guaraldi, who composed the memorable piano themes to the *Charlie Brown* specials in the 1970s. Similarly, the iconic music from *The Pink Panther*, with its Henry Mancini themes (written for the Blake Edwards movies) and cues composed at times by William Lava, Doug Goodwind, and Walter Greene, gave new life to a waning art form.

Looking at the state of Saturday morning cartoons today, it often seems that the classical style of animated film composing is dead. Studios hire composers to write a theme song and a few hours of synthesized library music, and then bring in a music editor to fit the library music into cartoon sequences. Most composers are willing to accept these commissions for no salary because, says Peter Wetzler, one of the composers for the short-lived space age cartoon, *The Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers*, "for one nationally syndicated half-hour show, in just one season, a composer can receive one million dollars in royalties."

There are always exceptions, however. Mark Mothersbaugh, the former Devo founder who has scored and writen themes for *Clifford, the Big Red Dog, Rugrats*, and more, studied the scores to Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoons and was amazed to discover how talented a composer Fred Steiner was, inserting as many as 165 separate musical cues into a single cartoon. Mothersbaugh explained his conversion from public performing to cartoon scoring: "After being in this band where we're working on twelve little songs for months and months, to all of a sudden where the first thing that came out of you was going to be on TV was kind of exciting. So I got the bug."

Another modern innovator is Glen Daum, who studied under Gyorgy Ligeti at Stanford. When Daum was commissioned to compose for Ralph Bakshi's TV series *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*, he was determined to turn in quality work inspired by past masters. "It's not an electronic score and I'm not trying to fake an orchestra with synthesizers," says Daum of his *Mighty Mouse* and *Chip 'n' Dale's Rescue Rangers* scores. "Unfortunately, I'm one of the few people doing that in present-day animation." His work for

Mighty Mouse is evocative of older, jazz-based cartoons, but something more is added. Daum uses tempos that "go all over the place," hilariously paced and compressed musical cues, and sounds from any and all musical genres, including jazz, Muzak, classical, blues, television show themes, and others. The bits, like the images in the cartoon, are often meant to be satirical. For the show's theme, he had his orchestra learn the original *Mighty Mouse* theme and then told them to play it "like they were in high school." The percussionist falls off beat, the saxophone player can't keep the reed in his mouth, and at the end the music trails off like a wind-up music box running down.

"You can be corny or contemporary; you can do anything," Daum says. "At one point, I had four different sections of the orchestra all playing different stuff at the same time. It was like Elliott Carter had scored the episode."

In the 1980s, a generation raised on Saturday morning cartoons came of age. From the frenetic rock of bands like Faith No More to the game theory pieces and speedball improvisations of avant-garde composer-musicians like John Zorn, cartoon music became a significant influence. "My concept of good music," Zorn says, "was based on what I used to listen to when I was a kid. I never really heard jazz until I was around twenty-one. Cartoon music was very important and the concept of the way the music changed really got stuck in my head."

It was only natural, then, that in the next decade, the work of cartoon pioneers finally began to be taken seriously. Producers Hal Willner and Greg Ford uncovered lost Warner Bros. recording sessions during a trip to California, put out a CD of classic Carl Stalling cues in 1990, and soon the Warner Bros. Symphony Orchestra was on tour, scoring Looney Tunes live. Milan records released a Scott Bradley compilation; Rhino Records put together a box set of Hanna-Barbera and Hoyt Curtin music; and Raymond Scott was rediscovered, with more than half a dozen CDs of his music released, along with tribute albums from musicians including the Beau Hunks and Don Byron. Today, nearly every pioneer of cartoon music has passed away—including Stalling, Scott, Curtin, Sharples, Kubik, and Guaraldi—yet their cartoons live on, bending the ears, expanding the minds, and sonically saving a generation raised on bland teenybopper pop.

Elements of this article originally appeared in Ear Magazine *and the* Village Voice. *Sources include the author's interviews with Hoyt Curtin, Dave Harris,*

Raymond Scott, Chuck Jones, Glen Daum, John Zorn, Sun Ra, Hal Willner, Mark Mothersbaugh, and others; various magazine, journal, and unpublished articles, including the interview with Carl Stalling on pages 37–60 of this volume, the speech given by Scott Bradley on pages 115–120, "A Technical and Historical Overview of Soundtrack Production Procedure in American Animated Film" by Arthur Kegerreis, "Notes on Cartoon Music" by Ingolf Dahl from Film Music Notes*, "Cartoon Post-Production in Video" by Bill Koepnick from* Mix *magazine, "Symphonies for the Sillies" by Ross Care from* Funnyworld*, and "A Sound Idea: Music for Animated Films" by Jon Newsom from the* Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*; and several books, including* Film Music: A Neglected Art *by Roy M. Prendergast,* Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons *by Leonard Maltin, and* Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art *by Robert Russett and Cecile Starr.*