

SCORING AUSTRALIA

Film Music and Australian Identities in *Young Einstein, Strictly Ballroom* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
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May 2002.



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CONTENTS

Abstract	i-ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Preface: Sonic Mnemonics	1-4
Chapter 1: Introduction - Establishing a Space for (Film) Sound Analysis	5-33
Chapter 2: Sounding a Coo-ee: Locating Australian Film Music	34-70
Chapter 3: Musical Hopscotch: Authorship and Australiana in <i>Young Einstein</i> 's Music	71-134
Chapter 4: "Soundbites Of Cultures": Hearing 'Multicultural Australia' in <i>Strictly Ballroom</i> 's Music	135-213
Chapter 5: "Drag Queens in the Outback": Nation, Gender and Performance in <i>Priscilla</i> 's Music	214-284
Conclusion: Sounding 'Australia'	285-303
Bibliography	304-321
 Appendices:	
1. <i>Young Einstein</i> Soundtrack Album Track Listing	322-323
2. <i>Strictly Ballroom</i> Soundtrack Album Track Listing	324
3. <i>The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert</i> Soundtrack and Songs Albums Track Listings and Contents	325-327
4. Music Cue Sheets for <i>The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert</i>	328-336

ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIAL

Tables

Table 0.1: Film Similarities	10
Table 0.2: Film Music Comparison	11
Table 0.3: Research Sources	12
Table 3.1: Running List of <i>Young Einstein's</i> Principal Musical Items	85/6
Table 3.2: <i>Young Einstein's</i> Principal Musical Cues (by category)	87
Table 3.3: Quotations in Categories (in order of use in <i>Young Einstein's</i> Music Track)	118/9
Table 4.1: Musical Elements in Composer Task Categories (in order of appearance in <i>Strictly Ballroom</i>)	157/8
Table 4.2: Main Musical Items Correlated with Storyline & Narrative Role	166/7
Table 4.3: Musical Tracks & Latinity (by brief title, in order of appearance)	170/1
Table 4.4: Mediated Cultural Worlds	208
Table 4.5: Mediation of Cultural Worlds in <i>Strictly Ballroom's</i> Music & Dance	209
Table 5.1: <i>Priscilla's</i> Music & Generic Classification	218
Table 5.2: Perspectives on <i>Priscilla</i> Characters	232
Table 5.3: Running Order for Principal Musical Items in <i>Priscilla's</i> Score	244/5

Lists

List 0.1: Primary Research Sources - Interviews	12
List 1.1: Analytical Approaches for Film Music	53
List 4.1: Dance Scenes in <i>Strictly Ballroom</i>	148
List 4.2: Original Tracks changed for <i>Strictly Ballroom</i> Score	163
List 5.1: Music Cues in Film Functional Categories	246/7
List 5.2: <i>Priscilla's</i> Original Music Cues in Categories	268/9

Music Notation

Figure 3.1: Morricone's Theme from <i>The Good, The Bad & The Ugly</i>	130
Figure 3.2: 'Young Einstein' Theme	131
Figure 3.3: 'Curie' Theme	132
Figure 4.1: Hirschfelder's 'London Derriere' Introduction	177
Figure 4.2: Hirschfelder's 'Doug's Tearful Waltz' Cue (main theme)	178
Figure 4.3: 'Flamenco Guitar' Cue (in E Phrygian Mode) for Toledo Café Scene	196
Figure 4.4: Melodic Hook from Vanda & Young's 'Love Is In The Air'	206
Figure 5: Gross's 'Bernadette's Theme' on Keyboard (with Extract of Choral Development)	269

Colour Reproductions

Plate 3.1: Front Cover of <i>Young Einstein</i> Soundtrack CD Sleeve Showing Einstein as Wacky Musician	97
Plate 3.2: Back Cover of <i>Young Einstein</i> Soundtrack CD Sleeve Showing Einstein in Bath Tub	97
Plate 3.3: Photos of Bands Used on <i>Young Einstein</i> Soundtrack CD Inner Sleeve	98
Plate 5: Photographs of Gross's Angklung Construction (Courtesy of Guy Gross)	266
Plate 6: Video Sleeve for <i>Priscilla</i> (showing Adam miming on top of bus)	303

ABSTRACT

National identity discourses have been examined in film and cultural studies over many years and recently revised in light of global media changes. Locally, Australian film successes (particularly in the lucrative US market) have contributed to self-reflexive analysis. However, film music and its discursive contribution to national identity have attracted little sustained examination, particularly in Australia and in relation to Australian cinema. *Scoring Australia* addresses this paucity of research. This thesis centres on two problems: first, how to 'read' film scores, particularly those that incorporate a number of non-Australian, pre-composed or pre-recorded popular music songs; and second, how such music tracks can represent Australia. Using textual and production analysis methodologies, this thesis examines original music items and popular songs in film, and demonstrates the manner in which music tracks can reinforce, inform and extend narrative explorations of identity.

This thesis analyses the music tracks for three Australian feature films of the late 1980s/early 1990s, namely, *Young Einstein* (directed by Yahoo Serious, 1988), *Strictly Ballroom* (directed by Baz Luhrmann, 1992), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (directed by Stephan Elliott, 1994). These films are generically similar, using comedic elements and drawing upon film musical traditions in their incorporation of popular music and performance. The films achieved commercial success partly due to their incorporation of specific music and songs. The thesis examines the production processes for these film music tracks (and associated soundtrack albums), and their relation to aspects of narrative, theme and characterisation. Research sources include primary interviews with filmmaking personnel (especially the film composers and directors) in addition to critical and theoretical material.

Each film study demonstrates how the music arises from and reflects the ideology of its social context and particular aspects of Australian culture. The *Young Einstein* analysis deals with the nature of 'national' musics; the *Strictly Ballroom* study examines appropriation, modification and adaptation of musical styles within a 'multicultural' society; and the *Priscilla* discussion focuses on musical interplay with drag and camp performance. The thesis acknowledges

discourses of multiple national identities, concluding with observations on the relationship between music and geographical place. It has not been the concern of this thesis to identify singularly 'Australian' sounds but, rather, a range of approaches to musical representation. Ultimately, it is argued, popular songs used in film music tracks can be adopted as integral to Australian culture and effectively signify alongside other musics generated by Australians for Australian films. The examination of these elements enables a (limited) study of Australian film music practices and production approaches, and an alternative perspective on Australian cinema.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any other tertiary education institution.

Signed: 

Date: 30/5/2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The preparation, research and writing of this thesis was assisted by many people, including the following:

Research, reading and feedback assistance from:

Aline Scott-Maxwell, John Whiteoak, Dan Bendrups, Jon Fitzgerald, Denis Crowdy – Chapter 4; and Jonas Baes, Stan Hawkins, Andy Bennett, and various members of IASPM Australasia – Chapter 5.

Research theses were kindly loaned by Lauren Anderson (in New Zealand), Catherine Simpson, Elizabeth Guiffre, and Jude Magee.

Librarians at Macquarie University (especially Wendy Palmer, and Interlibrary Loans Officers), AFTRS Library, the Australian Film Institute library in Melbourne, and various branches of the Gosford Municipal Library service.

Assistance from: Danielle Catteau and Paul Watters at BazMark Productions, Peter Hoyland and staff (agent for David Hirschfelder), Serious Entertainment staff.

Interviewees (in person, or by email or fax): Martin Armiger, Annie Breslin, Al Clark, Guy Gross, David Hirschfelder, Baz Luhrmann, Bill Motzing, John O'Connell, David Roach, Yahoo Serious.

Additional assistance in various forms: Jo Smith and the Australian Guild of Screen Composers, Mark Evans, Toru Seyama, Siva in the SCMP office, Peter Ring, Anna Abram and my colleagues in the Department of Media and Communications, and in the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies, at Macquarie University.

Musical notation was completed and formatted by Jerome Maludid and Denis Crowdy, Department of Contemporary Music Studies at Macquarie University.

This thesis was supervised in the early stages by Andrew Murphie and Nick Mansfield although the bulk of it was kindly undertaken (with attention to detail and astute observations, despite adverse circumstances) by Anne Cranny-Francis.

Support in various forms was provided by Rosa and Amelia Coyle-Hayward, Ruth and Roy Hayward, and the Coyle clan. This thesis has been generously assisted in innumerable ways and supported - from the outset and through to the end - by Philip Hayward.

SONIC MNEMONICS

(A Personal Preface)

This thesis analyses the music soundtracks for three Australian films - *Young Einstein* (1988), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) - in light of their production processes, their address to various constructions of Australia, and their relation to aspects of narrative, theme and/or characterisation. These films have been chosen as representative of stylistically similar feature films that achieved box office success in the 1980s and 1990s. They also share several features in their sound tracks, including the predominance of popular music songs over original music cues and their use of music to signify particular identities for Australia. I discuss the project in more detail in the introduction that follows but begin here with an explanation of how my engagement with film sound evolved.

The impetus for my interest in this topic and subsequent research project derived from two inter-related subjective responses. Far from being solely grounded in an intellectual endeavour based on a (questionable) notion of objective scholarship, this preface acknowledges how the motivation for this study was triggered by my personal reaction to two factors. The first is the curious dearth of research and analysis on music tracks for Australian feature films, particularly those proven successful in terms of box office figures. Such films are often discussed in light of their supposed 'formula' for success (such as their use of songs by popular artists as effective marketing tools) rather than for their cultural and artistic merit. This discursive lack around sound track analysis is apparent in a range of critical writing fora, ranging from popular media to academe. I am irritated when I read yet another film review stating that, while the sound track is engaging, the reviewer will not discuss it. This immediately begs the questions, 'why *not* include this aspect?' and, furthermore, 'how can your review *not* cover this essential ingredient of the movie and your response to it?' In the following chapters I will explore some explanations for the analytical absence in popular media, critical and academic circles, along with silences around specifically Australian film sound tracks.

This study's second motivational factor was the nature of the specific films chosen for analysis. The visual and aural references to 'Australia' in the films were both

pleasingly and overly familiar, causing me simultaneously to laugh and to cringe. Viewing *Young Einstein* in an Australian cinema after having spent five years living abroad triggered all sorts of visual and aural memories. Visually, the films self-consciously incorporate Australian signifiers, ranging from Yahoo Serious's flora and fauna in *Young Einstein*, to Stephan Elliott's images of frilled-neck lizards (both as wildlife and in nightclub costumes) in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Yet key moments in the music sound tracks mostly draw upon European/US popular songs rather than 'Australian' music, whether the latter is musicologically identifiable as 'Australian' (a complex issue that I discuss anon) or is used to signify Australia in other ways. The exception to this generalisation is *Young Einstein's* music, which specifically inserts tracks by Australian artists amongst European/US musical references and generic national signifiers (such as 'La Marseillaise', to refer to Paris as a location).

Furthermore, in these three films, not only are the songs primarily European/US tracks but, in many cases, they refer to eras prior to the production dates of the films. The musical sound track for *Priscilla* centres on disco hits from the 1970s and these songs provide an essential element in signifying the kind of performances enacted in the film, namely, camp acts and drag shows. *Strictly Ballroom's* source songs reflect the (Australian and generally Western) fascination with internationalised 'Latin American' musics, particularly in the dance context, giving the film a sense of timelessness that refers to both earlier periods in ballroom dance history and the current vogue for salsa dance and music. This complexity of musical association reminded me of the role that certain musics had played in my past, for example, an earlier connection I had had with Melbourne pub band Men At Work in the early 1980s. Their songs satirising aspects of Australian life and culture led to international success with singles like 'Down Under' (1981) that became a ^{culturally signifying} song for many Australians in the mid-1980s (of which I was reminded when Men At Work performed 'Down Under' in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games closing ceremony). The success of this single (in the lucrative US and UK markets, and elsewhere), its uncluttered production sound and bright, singalong melodic line allowed cynical Australians like myself to grudgingly accept the 'daggy' (uncool) references to "vegemite sandwiches". Similarly, upon returning to Australia after an overseas stint and settling in Sydney, I enjoyed the 1988 album *16 Lovers Lane* by the Go-Betweens in part for its references to and evocation of Australia (and for the music video for 'Streets of Your Town' single that featured images of band members travelling by car through recognisable metropolitan locations).

While the music played a significant role in my response to the films under discussion, as an Australian who had spent half of the 1980s living abroad, other ingredients of these soundtracks added to their sonic impact. One such ingredient was the performance of dialogue, particularly the manner of speaking. When Australian film underwent a renaissance in the 1970s and arthouse films like *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (dir: Peter Weir, 1975) and *My Brilliant Career* (dir: Gillian Armstrong, 1979) were released, together with commercial successes like *Mad Max* (dir: George Miller, 1979), hearing the Anglo-Australian word pronunciation and speech style in film enabled me to both identify strongly with and critique the films, their characters and acting in a manner not experienced with films from Britain, the US or elsewhere. Some time later I learned that the 'Australian accent' (whatever its definition as such) in Australian films was frequently modified for international release, thereby assisting comprehensibility for an international audience. Perhaps it is significant that, in five years based in London just prior to seeing *Young Einstein*, I learnt to modify my own 'educated' Anglo-Australian pronunciation in order to obtain employment in British Broadcasting Corporation radio production. The issue of Australian speech styles was highlighted again when I heard the speaking mannerisms in the three films analysed for this thesis, in which it seemed that there was enjoyment of Australian 'strine' and satirical play on certain pronunciations rather than modification of them. So a shift occurred in the sound of Australian film through the film industry's treatment of and attitude to Australian speech and 'accent'.¹ In addition, these films, particularly *Strictly Ballroom* incorporating dialogue by characters speaking Spanish mixed with English as a second language, reflected the supposedly broadly accepted 'multicultural' profile of the Australian population by the 1990s.

Alongside music and spoken dialogue are the sounds used in the films. The visual iconography ironically refers to Australia and the images, action, etc are linked to various uses of sound effects. Recognisable sonic nostalgia-triggers like magpies and currawongs calling, laughing kookaburras, or the 'wind in the wires' sound explored by Australian sound artists and experimental musicians² are rarely present. Rather these films are steeped in songs, sonic cultural signifiers

¹ Of course, I use the term 'accent' with some hesitation, given that it immediately suggests 'out of the usual' and implies that there must be a 'usual', a problematic concept given that an AusEnglish standard pronunciation has not been widely accepted. See my tentative exploration of this in relation to Australian film in Coyle (2001).

² See Andrew McLennan's essay on such sound artists (1995). *Kiss or Kill* (dir: Bill Bennett, 1997) eschews the use of music for its soundtrack, relying on sound atmos and effects to create sonic accompaniment and comment on the action, for example, the sound of wind to highlight space and travel.

(particularly, for example, in the use of the didgeridu) and/or comic sound gags. So it seemed to me that the overload of obvious visual iconography was not matched by similar sonic references. Thus the films were oddly close to 'home' and yet aurally removed from a familiar soundscape. This was particularly evident to me after viewing *Young Einstein* at a Double Bay cinema and strolling home to an Elizabeth Bay flat, close to the Rushcutters Bay Park on the Sydney Harbour foreshore, where several distinctive sounds signalled 'Australia', from the squeak of flying foxes (bats) gorging on the fig tree fruits at dusk, to the raucous squawk of sulphur-crested cockatoos circling the tower blocks at dawn. These sounds were redolent of 'home' as much as the harsh light quality, bright colour schemes, and smell of eucalypt trees. As I will show in the discussion of individual films, it was only when I delved much deeper that the musical connections of songs and original musics with Australia became evident. So this presents an analytical challenge, that is, how to talk about the film music in its entirety and its relationship to images and narrative as well as to cultural memory and place.

My interest in these tantalising areas of sound, music and speech developed into this project analysing three film case studies in terms of their musical address to Australian identities. The thesis specifically focuses on examination of the film *music* in three films in which music plays a prominent role and offers a narratively inscribed aspect of the drama, variously centred on drag, ballroom or rock musician performance. (Issues of film dialogue and sound effects are acknowledged as worthy of examination elsewhere.) Furthermore, while I have chosen to examine the musical properties of three specific films, the project offers a methodology and set of approaches to analysis of film music in Australian cinema both in the pre-millennium period and contemporarily. In the following chapter I will discuss the generation of such a methodology for my detailed explorations as well as for a broader project studying Australian film music.