



Claims Department Henry Mancini johnnyeponymous@gmail.com

I love film music, and Henry Mancini is the Patron Saint of Film Scores!

Now, there are so many great pieces that Mancini created, and *Baby Elephant Walk* is an all-time favorite, but I'm gonna cover him in one long article because that's something I can do with my brain right now!

Henry Mancini was born in 1924. He did the whole World War II thing, and afterwards joined the Glenn Miller Orchestra. That was the start of his career as an arranger and composer, but it really wasn't until the 1950s that we started to hear him make memorable movie sounds.

And memorable they were.

Let's look at *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

KOFY, Channel 20 did a thing. They spent MONTHS hyping a showing of *Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D! I had never seen it, and had never seen a 3D movie other than *Captain EO* at Disneyland. I waited and got my 3d glasses from 7-11 and waited for the day.

I may have gotten three or four pairs over the weeks.

So, the night came and it was beautiful! I loved it so much, but the thing I remember the most was the score. The score was brilliant! When I watched it again in my 20s, I realized that the score was perfect for the setting and was very much responsible for setting the tone for the entire film. The best part of the score was not the timing, but the way the orchestration moved through the score. The score isn't anything special when compared with other scores at the same time, in fact, I get it confused with others (like *It Came From Outer Space*) but the way it's played, with emphasis not on the stings, but on the build. The stings still hit, but the flow of the pieces drive the score along. While Hans Salter is credited as the composer of the score, Mancini contributed to the score, and was responsible for the orchestration.

He contributed to a number of scores, including *This Island Earth* (which despite what every SciFi nerd of a certain age claims actually IS a bad movie, save for the score and cinematography) and *It Came From Outer Space*. These films didn't quite have the stamp of Mancini, but you can see how they were influences on the future Mancini scores.

The Glenn Miller Story was a great movie, Jimmy Stewart in one of his better performances of the 1950s, and you would expect the score to be great, and since Mancini had played with the orchestra for ages, he was a natural. The score was nominated for the Oscar, but didn't win. The score was pretty much what you'd expect, full of markers of Glenn Miller, but set into a new mode with filmic elements of counterpoint and slowly building into the important moments. It's a straight-up big band jazz score, and it's great.

His score to *Touch of Evil* set the stage for 1950s and 60s Noir films, and it's the opening that absolutely kills it! It's got bongos providing a rhythm that moves it along. The score is exactly what the film needed (and otherwise, I'm only a moderate fan of *Touch of Evil*) and Mancini's score has everything you'd want from a Mancini score.

In 1958, Henry composed one of the most iconic scores in the history of television - *Peter Gunn*.

I have never seen a single episode of the show. Not a second, in fact, but I can whistle the entire theme. It's just permeated into the collective unconsciousness in a way that you instantly know it when it comes up. I'm pretty sure the first time I heard it was in *The Blues Brothers*. It has the perfect tone for a *Dragnet*-like show, and it's one of the toughest-sounding songs I've ever heard. It's so great, and I hear it over and over in my head. It's not a Noir theme; it's a cop theme. I love it.

Peter Gunn was the first time Mancini and director Blake Edwards worked together. They would collaborate on more than thirty projects. Three of them were world-class, among my favorite orchestral piece.

The Pink Panther was a top three cartoon when I was little, along with *Scooby-Doo* and *Capt. Caveman*. It's a pretty complex theme, with sax as the main voice. The cartoons, that were often completely scored in a way that the music was 2/3 of the show! I loved the main theme, and I still do, because it was so influential on the world of the cool! It's just such a cool song!

The thing that Mancini was so good at was presenting a sensation that infuses the material that it's included with. You can take a film segment and put two different Mancini pieces over the same material and get two different sensations. That's not unusual, but with Mancini, it gets elemental. He knows what to amplify in a way that so few others do. The best example is *Hatari!* and the remarkable song *Baby Elephant Walk*. It makes the scene all sorts of adorable, but watching it both with and without the score. The segment is about a tender taking some baby elephants to a waterhole, and John Wayne decides to follow them with a gun to protect her. Let me know *Hatari* is not a great movie, and it's way too static in shooting for a film with such dramatic scenery available. With the music, it's an absolute joyful segment. I smiled ear-to-ear. Without, it's all about John Wayne, about protecting them. The understanding of the movement of elephants, and particularly the half-clumsy way they teeter about, allowed Mancini to make that the focus of the scene instead of John Wayne. It's completely transformed and in the best way possible. The fact that it's been used over-and-over anytime you wanna make something seem fun (The best Simpsons quote, spoken by the Capitol City Goofball - 'Ah, Mancini: a mascot's best friend') kinda shows the power of the song (especially from such a forgettable film.)

Now, the two best traditional songs Mancini ever wrote were both for Blake Edwards films. *Moon River* for *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is an absolute masterpiece. It's sad and lovely, and even when sung by Audrey Hepburn, it's incredibly precise. It's lyrically one of the best pieces of film songwriting of the 1950s, and it would have worked nowhere else.

WHAT?!?!?!?! I hear you say. *It's been a hit dozens of times for other recording artists!*

This is true, but it is because of what Mancini tapped into with the song. If it had just been a song released by, say, Frank Sinatra, it would have been forgotten. It would have been a pretty song that was an enjoyable listen, but ultimately, it had no connections to build on. Once it was used in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* it had that connection, and at the same time, the utter perfection of the song as a song allowed for incredible levels of interpretation by those vocalists who had the emotional range of voice to pull it off.

Days of Wine and Roses might be a better orchestral work than *Moon River*. The strings and brushed drums set a sturdy table, and the floating horns mingling with the harmonious voices make it one of the most beautiful pieces you're ever likely to hear. The covers of *Days of Wine and Roses* are seldom as wonderful as those of *Moon River*, despite Andy William's exceptional versions of both. The power of *Days of Wine and Roses* comes from the power of the orchestration, the way the sounds are layered, and that's a difficult thing to duplicate. The lyrics are beautiful, but it takes a true master of them to really elevate it.

I should say that the first time I ever saw Henry Mancini, I thought it was a hoax.

I used to watch *Late Night with David Letterman* every night, and one night, early in the run, Paul Schaffer introduced Henry Mancini who had composed the theme to the Viewer Mail segment. Out walked Mancini, but I completely saw Carl Reiner. I mean, they could be brothers, looking back now, but for years I thought they were the same people. The Viewer Mail theme also proves that no matter how established you are, you can update your sound, as it's a purely 1980s orchestral theme, and if you listen to the YouTube video version when they debuted it, it's clearly of the moment when Mancini was no longer the trend-setter.

His TV work was exceptional, with the best of them being *Ripley's Believe-it-or-Not*. It's another great 80s theme, but the horn-work, specifically a lone trumpet in the middle, is incredible. What really makes it flow is that it's not too on the nose, but it also doesn't sound like something Henry had laying around, ready to go. It's a great theme that has elements of disquiet within a tradition opening mood setter. It's great!

In many ways, Henry Mancini defined what would be seen as Elevator Music in the 1980s and beyond. His 1950s and 60s served as a template for what we had on stations like KBAY in San Jose. *Theme from A Summer Place* is iconic for that style of music, and one of the most perfectly evocative of a particular time, place and age. His orchestrations and interpretations also helped define the genre, including what I consider to be the finest of his work in the arena, Paul William's *Evergreen*. The version that Mancini put out was magnificent.

There's so much more. He wrote the music for *Victor/Victoria*, which should have won him the Oscar, and oh wait, it did. It's one of Mancini's best scores, and it fulfills what Roger Ebert said about the film overall: Ultra-sophisticated.

There are so many more. The last film he did with Edwards, *Switch*, was a much better film than anyone gives it credit for (Ellen Barkin was great!) and the score was crisp and clean, not at all a reread of their former collaborations. The music for *Who's Killing the Great Chefs of Europe* can't be beat, either! If you wanna see exactly how good Mancini was at recognizing and playing with tone, that's one you should look at. Well... listen to.

Mancini defined the real movies of the 1950s through 80s. You can hear his influence on those who came out of the filmic tradition instead of transitioning from the traditional orchestral/classical music route like Philip Glass, Hans Richter, and Michael Nyman did. It's a very different experience, and American cinema is much better off having had him pass through.