



FILM MUSIC FOUNDATION

DANNY ELFMAN

An interview with composer and singer-songwriter Danny Elfman

In conversation with Jon Burlingame

Recorded July 30, 2014 at Danny Elfman's studio in Los Angeles, California by The Film Music Foundation

Footnotes supplied by Jennifer Rowekamp



DANNY ELFMAN (b. 1953)

Danny Elfman (born Daniel Robert Elfman) is an award-winning composer, singer-songwriter, actor, and record producer. He worked as the musical director of “The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo,” a performance art troupe established by his brother, Richard. His first scoring credit was for Richard’s 1979 film *Forbidden Zone* (Elfman, 1979). He was approached by Tim Burton and Paul Reubens in 1985 to score *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* (Burton, 1985), which established Elfman’s collaborative relationship with Burton; Elfman would go on to score nearly all of Burton’s major studio releases including *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman* (1989), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993). Elfman has also frequently collaborated with directors Sam Raimi (*Darkman*, 1990; *Spider-Man*, 2002) and Gus Van Sant (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Milk*, 2008) and worked with many others on films like *Dick Tracy* (Beatty, 1990) and the *Men in Black* franchise (Sonnenfeld, 1997–present). Alongside his scoring career, Elfman continues to compose concert and incidental music for works including Twyla Tharp’s ballet *Rabbit and Rogue* (2008) and Cirque Du Soleil’s show *Iris* (2011).

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Jon Burlingame: It is July 30, 2014, and we are here in Danny Elfman's studio in Los Angeles. Danny, thanks for participating here.

Danny Elfman: My pleasure.

Early Life and Family

Burlingame: Let's start at the beginning if we can. Where and when were you born?

Elfman: Los Angeles, California. May 29, 1953.

Burlingame: And did you grow up in the L.A. area?

Elfman: I've only lived in Los Angeles.

Burlingame: Is it the city or the [San Fernando] Valley?

Elfman: My studio where you're sitting right now is less than three miles from where I was born, so I'm the equivalent of a country bumpkin. I've traveled around the world many times but, take that out of the equation, and I'm like the small-town character who still lives just a few miles from where he was born.

Burlingame: Tell me about your parents, who they were and what they did for a living.

Elfman: My father [Milton],¹ and my mother [Blossom],² were both schoolteachers, but they both had caveats to that. My mother at about forty decided she really wanted to write (she had been an English teacher), so she had a great career change. She [wrote] many novels and got an Emmy for her first script, a TV movie. She got to have the creative outlet that she'd always wanted. My father's story was interesting, but the opposite. He started out in music, which I never knew growing up because we did not have music in our family. He was also a schoolteacher, an elementary school teacher. I found a trumpet in the closet once and asked about it. I was told, "Oh, that's Dad's, he used to play trumpet." I tried to get him to talk about it. He would just go, "Nah, nah, that's just nothing." But I heard then through others that he had been a big band trumpet player in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where he grew up and struck out for California to try to hit the music business. None of us knew this as children growing up. He never mentioned it. He had no bitterness whatsoever. He seemed like a content elementary

¹ Milton O. Elfman (1915–2001) was born in Chicago, Illinois. He played trumpet in a Big Band in Kenosha, Wisconsin and served in the U.S. Air Corps. After moving to Los Angeles, he qualified as a schoolteacher. Milton was the husband of novelist Clare "Blossom" Elfman (1925–2017, see footnote 2) and father of musicians Danny and Richard (see footnote 3) Elfman. Milton had an actor's role in the movie *Shrunk Heads* (Elfman, 1994; *Shrunk Heads*. Full Moon Pictures, 2021. DVD.).

² Clare "Blossom" Elfman (née Bernstein, 1925–2017) was an American novelist, wife of Milton (1915–2001, see footnote 1), and mother of Danny and Richard (see footnote 3). Her books include *The Girls of Huntington House* (1972) and *The Sister Act* (1979). She won a Daytime Emmy for "Outstanding Individual Achievement in Children's Programming" for writing the CBS Afternoon Playhouse episode *I Think I'm Having a Baby* (1981).

school teacher—but that’s how my mother and father met, because he came here to get into music, decided it was not for him and went back to school, got his degree and became a schoolteacher.

Burlingame: Wow, that’s a great story. Now, you say, “us”—did you have siblings growing up?

Elfman: My brother [Richard]³ and I grew up together—he’s four years older than me—and I had a half-sister [Judith],⁴ who’s no longer with us. But my brother and I growing up, like I said, it was a real normal family. But it was not musical, or particularly artistic in any way that I can remember. It was just very normal, middle class, suburban America.

Early Influence of Films, Composer Bernard Herrmann, and Ray Harryhausen

Burlingame: I understand your interest in movies actually predates your interest in music. So, can you tell me about your movie-going and TV-watching habits as a kid?

Elfman: I really grew up on movies. I grew up in an area in Los Angeles called Baldwin Hills, and this was an era in the 1960s. Parents did not drive or accompany their kids to school or just about anywhere. We were left to fend for ourselves, and quite happily so. I walked to school every day, and every weekend I walked down to the Baldwin Hills movie theater, probably half a mile away. I could only describe the walk like this: Every boy ended up there on the weekends. I rarely saw a girl in the theater, and I never saw a parent. This was a very particular era of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. Occasionally, they would play a Disney⁵ movie and we would boycott, all of us. If there were no monsters, if nothing died, if there were no aliens, we had no interest in the films. No Dracula,⁶ no Frankenstein,⁷ no mutants, no zombies—forget it. We just weren’t there.

³ Richard Elfman (b. 1949) is an American actor, director, screenwriter, author, and musician. His directorial credits include music videos for Oingo Boingo (see footnote 43) songs “Little Girls” (1981), “Private Life” (1982), and “Nothing Bad ever Happens to Me” (1983) as well as the musical comedy film *Forbidden Zone* (1982, see footnote 48).

⁴ Judith Faye Elfman (1943–2012) was the daughter of Milton Elfman and his first wife Adeline Esther Silverman (1917–2006).

⁵ The Walt Disney Company, colloquially referred to as “Disney,” is an American mass media and entertainment conglomerate originally founded as an animation studio in 1923 by brothers Walt (1901–1966) and Roy (1893–1971) Disney. The company’s groundbreaking animated films created such characters as Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto. Disney films released in the 1960s include *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (Reitherman, Luske, and Geronimi, 1961; *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. Disney Home Video, 1999. DVD.) and *Mary Poppins* (Stevenson, 1964; *Mary Poppins: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.).

⁶ Count Dracula is the titular character from the 1897 novel *Dracula* by Irish author Bram Stoker. The gothic horror novel follows the story of the vampire Count Dracula as he moves from Transylvania to England and his opposition led by Professor Abraham Van Helsing. Dracula has been the subject for many film and television adaptations since the original novel.

⁷ Frankenstein’s monster, often erroneously referred to as simply “Frankenstein,” is the monster created by Dr. Victor Frankenstein in English author Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Like Dracula (see footnote 6), Frankenstein’s monster has been the subject of many film and television adaptations.

On those weekends, we would then go to one of two other theaters in Culver City. It reminds me of *Village of the Damned*,⁸ a movie I saw as a child. We'd start out—maybe there'd be two of us, me and my older brother, for example—walking, and then two more and two more, and then gradually you'd get groups of four and eight coming together, and as we were getting closer to the theater, tens, twelves, and fifteens all converging on that theater. That was my equivalent of going to church on the weekend. Frequently I would go both days, Saturday and Sunday, and sometimes I would see a movie, three, four, five times. So, what I remember most about my childhood was the movies.

Burlingame: And in particular, horror and science fiction and fantasy movies?

Elfman: Oh, well, yeah. Only about ninety-five percent, yeah. There were a few comedies I saw, but not many.

Burlingame: Were you aware of the music in these films you were watching?

Elfman: I became aware of the music at about twelve. I didn't realize at that time that the movies that we took for granted—it was a double bill, two movies every weekend—weren't always either new, fresh releases, or American. I learned later that there were movies from all over the world, from Mexico, from Spain, from Italy, from France. We were seeing the world's horror and science fiction films and fantasy films. It was the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.⁹ I was about twelve or thirteen when I saw it. I didn't learn till later that it actually came out twelve or thirteen years earlier. To me, it was just a new movie that had come out that year, but the score really struck me. [It was] the first time I noticed the name next to the music: Herrmann, Bernard Herrmann.¹⁰ In the coming years in that period, every time I saw Bernard Herrmann's name, I knew there was going to be a little something extra in the film. What I called the double whammy in those days was the double H, [Ray] Harryhausen¹¹ and Herrmann. If it had those two names, it was certainly going to be my favorite movie of the year.

Burlingame: And some of those Harryhausen and Herrmann movies were...

⁸ *Village of the Damned*. Directed by Wolf Rilla, 1960; *Village of the Damned/Children of the Damned: Double Feature*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

⁹ *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Directed by Robert Wise, 1951; *The Day the Earth Stood Still: 2-Disc Special Edition*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

¹⁰ Bernard Herrmann (1911–1975) was an award-winning American composer and conductor best known for his work in film, television, and radio. He collaborated often with director Alfred Hitchcock (see footnote 16), including on the films *North by Northwest* (1959, see footnote 91) and *Pyscho* (1960, see footnote 17), and with director Orson Welles on many radio dramas as both a conductor and composer. Herrmann's other notable scores include *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941; *Essential Classics: Dramas*. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.) and *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976; *Taxi Driver*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.).

¹¹ Ray Harryhausen (1920–2013) was an American artist, visual effects designer, writer, and producer known for his technique called “Dynamation,” a process that made it appear as though on-screen actors were interacting with animated elements. He worked on films like *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958, see footnote 12), *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963, see footnote 13), and *Mighty Joe Young* (Schoedsack, 1949; *Mighty Joe Young*. Warner Archive Collection, 2014. DVD.).

Elfman: Well, *7th Voyage of Sinbad*,¹² *Jason and the Argonauts*,¹³ *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.¹⁴ These were big movies.

Burlingame: *Mysterious Island*.¹⁵

Elfman: *Mysterious Island*, yeah.

Burlingame: Did you see any of the [Alfred] Hitchcock¹⁶ films with Herrmann's music?

Elfman: I was not allowed to see Hitchcock because, in those formative years, the big film of his that came out was *Psycho*.¹⁷ It's the only film I was ever forbidden to see. I mean, we saw grotesque stuff, but [our parents] didn't know what it was. *Psycho* got enough publicity and attention that it went on the radar of our parents and because the radar was set [to] 'sexual', not 'horrific', then it was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute—you're not going to see that." I [said], "What do you mean I'm not going to see that?" "You're not going to see that." Big tantrum, but it did no good, I couldn't see it. So, the first movie of his that I did get to see was *The Birds*,¹⁸ which ironically had no score, but I became instantaneously a Hitchcock fan. Then, of course, I had to wait and see *Psycho* and more, much more, later.

Picking Up the Violin at Age 18 and Playing in France

Burlingame: When did music become an interest of yours? When did you first pick up an instrument?

Elfman: I was very late. When I moved from Baldwin Hills to West Los Angeles, in between middle school and high school, I fell in with new friends. I started a new everything. I didn't have any friends [from the old school]. I owe my musical career to the fact that most of my [new] friends played instruments. It was kind of a musical group, but I didn't [play]. In fact, I was the only one who didn't among my friends. So, my first instrument was at eighteen, and at that point, my tastes had become much more eclectic.

¹² *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*. Directed by Nathan Juran, 1958; *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

¹³ *Jason and the Argonauts*. Directed by Don Chaffey, 1963; *Jason and the Argonauts*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1998. DVD.

¹⁴ *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Directed by Henry Levin, 1959; *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

¹⁵ *Mysterious Island*. Directed by Cy Endfield, 1961; *Mysterious Island*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD.

¹⁶ Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) was an acclaimed English film and television director, screenwriter, and producer. Known as "the Master of Suspense" and considered one of the most influential filmmakers of all time, Hitchcock's films include *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940; *Rebecca*. Criterion Collection, 2017. DVD.), *Vertigo* (1958, see footnote 90), *North by Northwest* (1959, see footnote 91), *Psycho* (1960, see footnote 17), and *The Birds* (1963, see footnote 18).

¹⁷ *Psycho*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1960; *Alfred Hitchcock: Essential Collection*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

¹⁸ *The Birds*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1963; *Alfred Hitchcock: Essential Collection*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

First off, a trumpet player who was a good friend of mine introduced me to two things the same year: Miles Davis¹⁹ and [Igor] Stravinsky.²⁰ It literally turned my world upside down. *The Rite of Spring*²¹ changed everything for me forever—as did *Bitches Brew*,²² which was another album at the time. Next thing I knew, within a one to two-year period, all my rock and roll albums, my pop albums were gone. I just boxed them up [and] dumped them. I’d like them all back now, thank you, but I don’t know what happened to them. My approach changed completely. Now the record collection was John Coltrane,²³ Ornette Coleman,²⁴ Eric Dolphy,²⁵ Sun Ra,²⁶ and Stravinsky. [Sergei] Prokofiev²⁷ led to [Dmitri] Shostakovich,²⁸ led to more of the Russian composers and they became this big influence on me, but I didn’t know in what way.

In the same period of time, I became infatuated with early 1930’s jazz: Duke Ellington,²⁹ Cab Calloway,³⁰ and Django Reinhardt.³¹ So, I decided I needed to pick up an instrument secretly and

¹⁹ Miles Davis (1926–1991) was an American jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and composer considered to be one of the most influential jazz musicians of all time. Known for his role in the development of cool jazz, a subgenre of jazz consisting of relaxed tempos and softer playing styles, Davis’s best-known records include *Birth of Cool* (1957), *Kind of Blue* (1959), and *Bitches Brew* (1970, see footnote 22).

²⁰ Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) was a Russian composer, conductor, and pianist. An influential and important twentieth-century composer, Stravinsky’s diverse oeuvre includes the ballets *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), *The Rite of Spring* (1913, see footnote 21), as well as the works *L’Histoire du soldat* (1918) and *Les Noces* (1923).

²¹ *Le Sacre du printemps* [*The Rite of Spring*] is a ballet and orchestral work composed by Igor Stravinsky (see footnote 20). Written for the Ballet Russes under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev, it premiered in Paris in 1913 and, due to its avant-garde musical style and unusual choreography, caused an audience uproar. The piece has since established itself as an influential and important work of twentieth-century music.

²² *Bitches Brew* is a 1970 album by jazz trumpeter and composer Miles Davis (see footnote 19). One of Davis’s most popular and influential albums, it features tracks such as “Bitches Brew” and “Miles Runs the Voodoo Down.”

²³ John Coltrane (1926–1967) was an American jazz saxophonist, bandleader, and composer. Known for his use of modes and free jazz, Coltrane’s albums include *Blue Train* (1958) and *A Love Supreme* (1965). In addition to his work as a bandleader, Coltrane appeared on albums by many prominent jazz musicians of the time including trumpeter Miles Davis (see footnote 19) and pianist Thelonious Monk.

²⁴ Ornette Coleman (1930–2015) was an American jazz saxophonist, violinist, trumpeter, and composer. A founder of the genre of free jazz (a subgenre of jazz with experimental improvisational styles), Coleman’s albums include *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1961), and *Sound Grammar* (2006).

²⁵ Eric Dolphy (1928–1964) was an American jazz saxophonist and woodwind player. He played alongside jazz musicians like Ornette Coleman (see footnote 24) and John Coltrane (see footnote 23).

²⁶ Known as Sun Ra, Le Sony’r Ra (1914–1993) was an American jazz composer, pianist, and keyboardist, and bandleader of the free jazz ensemble The Arkestra. Known for his experimental music and theatrical performances, Ra’s albums include *Lanquidity* (1978) and *Space is the Place* (1973).

²⁷ Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) was a Russian Soviet composer, conductor, and pianist. A major figure in twentieth-century music, Prokofiev’s diverse and extensive body of work includes five piano concertos, seven symphonies, orchestral suite *Lieutenant Kijé* (1934), vocal and orchestral work *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1938), and film score to *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein and Vasilyev, 1938; *Eisenstein: The Sound Years*. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD.).

²⁸ Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) was a Russian composer and pianist. A major twentieth-century composer, Shostakovich’s best-known works include his symphonies and his string quartets.

²⁹ Edward “Duke” Ellington (1899–1974) was an American jazz pianist, composer, and bandleader considered a seminal figure of American jazz and popular music. His compositions include “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1927, see footnote 42), “Take the ‘A’ Train” (1939), “It Don’t Mean a Thing” (1931), and “In a Sentimental Mood” (1935).

³⁰ Cabell “Cab” Calloway III (1907–1994) was an American jazz singer, dancer, and bandleader. A regular performer at the Cotton Club in Harlem, New York, Calloway’s big band included musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Ben Webster, and Danny Barker. One of his best-known songs is “Minnie the Moocher” (1931, see footnote 50).

³¹ One of the most prominent European jazz musicians of all time, Jean “Django” Reinhardt (1910–1953) was a Romani-French jazz guitarist and composer who formed the jazz string band Quintette du Hot Club de France, “The

learn it—secretly—it was way too late for me to become a musician. I [was] eighteen; all of my friends [had] been playing since they were kids. So, for me, it was like: “Well, clearly I’ll never be a musician, but I’ll pick up an instrument.” I wanted to play violin like Stéphane Grappelli.³² You know, of course, I was never going to be able to play like Stéphane Grappelli, but I had planned to take off early my Senior year and travel around the world with another friend. He had a saxophone and I decided [I was] going to bring a violin and just travel through the world, playing our instruments. I did in fact pick up a violin and by ear, I started learning it. I tried a few lessons. Like everything else I’d ever tried with lessons, it failed miserably. I was told I had no propensity. In elementary school, I once tried to pick up trombone and join the orchestra, and I was told, “No propensity for music.”

I started a year of travel with this violin and this funky case with a shoulder strap along with my huge backpack. It was crazy. When I left originally to go to Africa, where we were beginning our trip, [I had] the mega-backpack with a violin strapped on, with seven books, thick, hard bound books. It was absurd. I never was going to go very far. It lightened and lightened as we went. On route to Africa, I stopped in Paris, the first of many random fateful events. My brother lived there, and he played conga drums with a musical theatrical troupe that he met randomly two years earlier. So, I thought, “How cool! My brother is living in France. I’ll spend a week there with him.” I was practicing my fiddle in his room—I would practice for an hour a day. I came out one day and he was sitting there with this French director of this troupe which was called “Le Grand Magic Circus”³³ in Paris. And he said, “You want to come on the road with us?” And I was like, “What do you mean?” He [said], “You could play the violin,” I [replied], “I can’t play the violin.” He [said], “Yeah, you sound fine. You’re fine.” And I said, “Okay.” And so, instead of going off to Africa I actually toured France for a month, with this avant-garde musical theatrical troupe, learning tunes by ear. They were real rough and tumble; they were not looking for precision. I’d been playing for four months at that time, but they felt I was fine. So, I went from zero to bad, somehow managing to play in front of large, crazy audiences all over France and Belgium when I was eighteen years old. Things started off with a bang.

Traveling Around Africa and Returning to America

Burlingame: So, then you spent several months in Africa?

Elfman: I spent almost a year.

Burlingame: And was there any musical experience on the way, in Africa?

Elfman: I had fantastic musical experiences all throughout Africa. Had it all worked out, Africa was supposed to just be the beginning of a tour that was going through North Africa, to India, Asia, Nepal, [and] back to Los Angeles. Well, once again, fate had something different [in

Quintet of the Hot Club of France,” with violinist Stéphane Grappelli (see footnote 32). Reinhardt’s most famous compositions include “Minor Swing” (1937) and “Nuages” (1940).

³² Stéphane Grappelli (1908–1997) was an acclaimed French jazz violinist who, along with guitarist Django Reinhardt (see footnote 31), founded the jazz string band Quintette du Hot Club de France.

³³ Le Grand Magic Circus was a popular theatre group based in Paris. Originally called the “Compagnie Jérôme Savary,” Grand Magic Circus was founded in 1965 by Argentinian-French director and actor Jérôme Savary.

mind]. I came off of this tour with La Grand Magic Circus tired. Some people in the troupe had talked about this place called Lanzarote in the Canary Islands. “You should check it out, it’s really wonderful.” My friend and I decided, “Well, let’s go to Lanzarote for a while, why not?” In Lanzarote, I made new friends. They had fetishes of cowry shells and wood figures and hair on their walls and on their mantle pieces, and I became fascinated with [these]. They were all from Mali. Next thing I knew, we were on a boat for Mauritania, which was the Sahara, en route to Mali, which was the other direction. We were supposed to go north. Instead we began, what ended up being almost a year, going through West and Central [Africa]. Not a single city that we had planned meticulously for many months to [visit] on this journey did we ever go to, other than Paris.

Burlingame: So, when did you come back to America? And what happened next for you?

Elfman: Well, I had been ill many times crossing Africa. I had malaria, probably two, three times. A German doctor whose name I will never know [saved my life], either in the North of Senegal or Gambia, I can’t even remember right now. It was in this loop we were making from Mali through Senegal, Gambia, Mali, then Upper Volta and then working back down to the coast through Ghana. Somewhere in that loop I became very ill. After a week of not being able to take food or fluids, I was starting to hallucinate. The fever was so out of control—I had these wild nights. I still remember dodging razor-like blades of a creature that was trying to slice me up in the bed that I was in. I’d wake up exhausted and he would disappear as the sun came up. The fever was getting worse, and the kids in the village told this German doctor coming through, “There’s an American you [must] come help. He’s in bad shape.” I remember this face appearing saying, “You need penicillin.” If I [had been] allergic to penicillin, I wouldn’t be alive today, because that’s all [you had] back then. They gave me a huge injection of penicillin, turned things around, and I was able to continue my journey.

By the time I got to Kenya—it’s the long story made long—I was ready to come home. Technically, that was halfway through the journey. About a year had gone by and then I was diagnosed with hepatitis in Nairobi. I said, “You know what? That’s it, I’m out of here.”

Backing up just a second, Mali was everything I could have imagined. It was a huge musical influence on me. I played with other musicians. I became infatuated with the kora³⁴ and the balafon.³⁵ The balafon is the xylophone-like instrument, and I sent a number of them home, which I still have. So yes, that was a big influence on me, but I was ready to come home. So, at nineteen years old, I come home, ill but no worse for the wear, I suppose. My brother had already returned before me and started his version of “La Grande Magic Circus.” It was a street

³⁴ The kora is a West African plucked string instrument. Koras typically have 21 strings and a long neck with a round, calabash (gourd) body and a leather soundboard. An image of the kora can be viewed on the instrument’s entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: <https://www.britannica.com/art/kora-musical-instrument>

Demonstrations can be found on the Kora Music Website: <https://www.kora-music.ml/the-music-of-the-kora/>

³⁵ The balafon is an African wooden and gourd-resonated xylophone most closely associated with tribes in West Africa. Balafons have between 17 to 21 keys and are tuned in a variety of scales depending on the performer’s culture. Images of a balafon can be viewed in the following article on the balafon by The Drum Connection: <https://www.drumconnection.com/djembe-repairs/the-balafon-history-and-culture/>

Demonstrations can be heard on the album *Balafon: Anthologie du Balafon Mandingue*, vol. 1 by El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyate: <https://music.apple.com/gb/album/balafon-anthologie-du-balafon/166993849>

troupe much inspired by that French troupe, called “The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo.”³⁶ The day I came home, he told me I’m to be the musical director: “It’s okay. Rest for a few days and you can just sit in and watch rehearsals. I know you have hepatitis; you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.” So, I started what began a seven or eight-year stint with The Mystic Knights on the streets.

The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo

Burlingame: So, this is the 1970s?

Elfman: Yeah, starting in 1972 and taking me through 1978-9. And it was like a world unto itself.

Burlingame: And I think unique, really. There was nothing like it in the Los Angeles music scene, right?

Elfman: Well, I don’t even know if you’d call it the music scene. What were we? I mean, somewhere between a theater troupe and a band. Everybody had to play three instruments, so we started with seven or eight [players] and by the time we ended, we were twelve. We would double up as either a brass and wind ensemble, all string ensemble, all percussion. Leon Schneiderman³⁷—who I went to West Africa with, and also was very much into these instruments—and I started building instruments. We built two huge ensembles of percussion instruments. We were both very much into Harry Partch,³⁸ a composer (much earlier) who was very inventive. He invented his own types of percussion, so we began doing the same thing.

[Let me go] back to my high school group, the drummer in our group—the one who everybody thought would not live to see his twentieth birthday, the crazy one. [He] had worked himself into becoming an excellent percussionist. He started teaching me about modern percussionists—Lou Harrison,³⁹ people who also built their own percussion instruments—and he’s still out there, now in San Francisco. Composers write him featured work; he travels all over the world. His name’s Willy Winant,⁴⁰ William Winant. So, he influenced [me], he taught me certain things.

³⁶ The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo was a surrealist performance art theatrical troupe founded in 1972 and led by Richard Elfman (see footnote 3) and his wife Marie Pascale, the lead performer of Le Grand Magic Circus (see footnote 33). Richard passed off leadership of the group to his brother Danny, who then lead the band through its reformation into the new wave band Oingo Boingo (see footnote 43) in 1979. Original members of the Mystic Knights include Leon Schneiderman (see footnote 37), William Winant (see footnote 40), and Dale Turner.

³⁷ Leon Schneiderman is an American saxophonist, percussionist, singer, and founding member of the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo (see footnote 36) and its successive iteration, Oingo Boingo (see footnote 43).

³⁸ Harry Partch (1901–1974) was an American composer, inventor, instrument builder, and music theorist. Partch was known for his use of microtonal scales and his innovations in instrument building and tuning. His works include *Eleven Intrusions* (1949–1950), *Oedipus* (1951, 1952–1954, 1967), and *The Bewitched* (1955).

³⁹ Lou Harrison (1917–2003) was an American composer noted for his work with microtones and just (or pure) intonation. His works include a *Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra* (1959), *Piano Concerto* (1935–1985), and *Suite for Percussion* (1942).

⁴⁰ William Winant (b. 1953) is an American percussionist and previous member of the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo (see footnote 36). He has dozens of recording credits and is currently a faculty member at Mills College in Oakland, California. Winant received a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists award in 2016.

Michael Byron,⁴¹ the trumpet player, brought me into the world of orchestral music, [as well as] being a film music fan.

I was picking up things as I went, but then, in *The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo*, I had to start applying it all, but in a very—I don't know how to describe it—a rag-tag way. We played on the streets. I picked up trombone, I picked up guitar, I picked up baritone horn, I was playing all the percussion. Meanwhile, I wasn't doing the one thing my parents had counted on, which was going to college. It was like always, "One year, just one year and I promise, off to the university." "Two years, this is it." But I was breathing fire (we had an acrobat fire breather who taught me how to breathe fire). I was going between playing the violin, playing the guitar, breathing fire, playing trombone and learning how to notate and transcribe music. They were important years for me.

Introduction to Writing Music

Burlingame: Is that when you started to actually write music, during this period of the 1970s?

Elfman: Yeah. There was a point where [in] the original band, nobody read music. I was just starting to come up with things, compositions, and [I had to] teach them by rote—meaning, [I had to] play them the parts. I hadn't known at that time, [but] my musical sense was simply going to make that impossible really quickly. Then we started bringing in people who read, and then I had to start writing. Originally, that was for transcription, because we did early [covers of] Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Django Reinhardt. I wanted them to be perfect.

One of the first pieces I ever tackled was a Duke Ellington composition called "Black and Tan Fantasy."⁴² I really wanted to nail it. I wanted to get the piano part perfectly, and [it was] during those years that I developed my confidence in my ear. We didn't have DVDs and CDs, obviously. There were just records, so I put the needle on. I got [the notes for] that section. I took [the needle] off. I could hold on to [the notes] long enough to get them down on paper. [In this way] I learned writing, even though I could never learn to read. Whenever I tried lessons—once on a guitar, on piano, on violin—[my reading] was miserable; I never could play a piece of music in front of a teacher, but writing felt easy, because writing was just mathematics. Once you subdivide a quarter note into eighth notes, sixteenth notes, tie them together with triplets, it's not that difficult to take a phrase and break it down into the elements and write it down. So, I learned [to write], as impossible as reading seemed to [be for] me. I still think that I have a brain problem with that, because I could learn a second language [but] I could never learn to read properly. Learning to write was easy.

I was able to write everything down, pretty much as I needed to, but I was only able to read exactly as fast as I could write by hand, because writing came before reading. I could read in writing time but not real time, if that makes any sense. It's very difficult to explain that. Other

⁴¹ Michael Byron (b. 1953) is an American composer and trumpet player who was a previous member of the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo (see footnote 36). His works include *Music of Steady Light* (1996), *The Capital of Dawn* (1999), and *The Celebration* (2009–2012).

⁴² "Black and Tan Fantasy" is a 1927 jazz composition by Duke Ellington (see footnote 29) and trumpeter Bubber Miley.

than, I think, it's similar to—if somebody illiterate taught themselves the alphabet, had stories in their head, and then learned to type and learned that they could actually type entire stories or even a novel if they'd wished. When they took out the paper to read it, [however], they could only read at the exact same pace that they could type. That was exactly [the case for] me with music. If that person didn't learn to read first, but learned to type first, their reading skill might be tied to their typing speed. Those two went hand in hand with me, so I was in a very weird situation.

Oingo Boingo and Ska Influences

Burlingame: So, we'll move on toward films in a minute, but was there a point at which The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo, became Oingo Boingo?⁴³ Those seem like two different things.

Elfman: They were two completely different things that shared half a name, me and the guitarist, Steve Bartek,⁴⁴ who now is still my orchestrator on almost a hundred films, and the three horn players. We were doing month-long runs in theaters, and musically the show was very ambitious. I was starting to write weird, but elaborate, compositions. I wrote a thing called, "The Oingo Boingo Piano Concerto Number One and a Half."⁴⁵ Without having written that, I never would have taken *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*⁴⁶ later because I had to write all the parts for twelve-piece [band], and that leads to the next thing. That was critical for me.

I woke up one morning and I heard this new kind of music coming from England called *ska*. Now you've got to realize in the 1970s, I would listen to nothing written after 1938. I "lived" in New York, Cotton Club, Harlem, or little cafés in Paris, or Russia—Europe 1922. I mean, my mind was in these places. I wasn't even aware of bands or things that happened during the 1970s. I [couldn't] give a shit; it's like none of that mattered to me. I was totally locked into an earlier era. I felt like I was born out of time and place and mentally, I lived in the 1930s.

Somehow, I heard this *ska* music from England, and it took me back to the pop music in Africa that I loved, which was called *Highlife*. *Ska* was like double-time reggae.⁴⁷ It was like reggae, but really high energy and that energy connected with me immediately. I just said, "I want to start a

⁴³ Developed from The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo (see footnote 36), Oingo Boingo was an American ska-inspired new wave band formed in 1979 by Danny Elfman. The original members included Elfman, Steve Bartek (see footnote 44), Richard Gibbs, Kerry Hatch, Johnny Hernandez, Leon Schneiderman (see footnote 37), Sam Phipps, and Dale Turner. Their songs include "Dead Man's Party" (1985) and "Weird Science" (1985).

⁴⁴ Steve Bartek (b. 1952) is an American guitarist, composer, orchestrator, and conductor. He was one of the founding members of the band Oingo Boingo (see footnote 43) and has orchestrated for Danny Elfman on films like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990, see footnote 81) and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993, see footnote 106).

⁴⁵ *Oingo Boingo Piano Concerto Number One and a Half* is a piano concerto written by Danny Elfman for the band Oingo Boingo (see footnote 43) in the late 1970s.

⁴⁶ *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. Directed by Tim Burton, 1985; *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

⁴⁷ Reggae is a genre of popular music that developed in Jamaica in the 1960s and spread in popularity through the influence of artists like Bob Marley, Toots and the Maytals, and Jimmy Cliff. It developed from earlier styles like *mento* (Jamaican folk music combining African and European musical elements) and *ska* (a Jamaican genre combining elements of mento, calypso, and jazz). Reggae generally features socially critical lyrics, a moderately fast tempo, a focus on beat three instead of one, and counterpoint between the bass line and off-beat rhythm section.

rock band.” So, me and Steve and the horn section—and, by the way, the *ska* bands had almost the same instrumentation as the African bands—a small horn section, two, three, four pieces, couple of guitars, bass, and drums—we started the band Oingo Boingo. The weirdest thing is that we tried to have a different name for a while and we had a half a dozen, I won’t even tell you what they were, but we ended up just saying, “Let’s just take Oingo Boingo.” Could not have made it more confusing. Describing it later, the difference [was that] The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo played no music written after the late 1930s, unless it was an original composition of mine; [and] Oingo Boingo was a rock band, that played amplified electronic music [and] no older music at all.

Forbidden Zone: First Experience with Music in Film

Burlingame: Okay, so I want to ask about *Forbidden Zone*.⁴⁸ Was this your first experience with music in film?

Elfman: Yeah, this [was] my first. Around 1977, I think, somewhere around there, my brother [Richard] left The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo to do the *Forbidden Zone*. He really wanted to do a film. I took over the group, the “troupe” as we call it, not the “band”, and he went off to do *Forbidden Zone*. The caveat was I had to do the music and do a part in it. My entire family was in it. My grandfather was in it. My father was in it. His wife did the sets—it was like a family project. So I said, “Alright, cool.” I wrote the songs that he wanted to do, and it was fun. I appeared in the character that I loved doing on stage, which was this Cab Calloway/Betty Boop⁴⁹ influenced devil doing “Minnie the Moocher.”⁵⁰ Then he finished the whole thing and I had to do a score. Well, the score was just me and The Mystic Knights, so I wasn’t writing orchestrally but electric piano and some various instruments. I was starting to actually put music to image, to film, and that was the first time, yeah.

The Beginning of Oingo Boingo’s Success

Burlingame: And Oingo Boingo continued on as a band into the 1980s.

Elfman: Well, that was right at the transition because, as *Forbidden Zone* was finishing up, we were just ending The Mystic Knights. They were having their final shows. The weird crossover point [was] the theme song to *Forbidden Zone* which [used] electronic instruments, like we were about [to] start doing with Oingo Boingo. We would never have done [that] with The Mystic Knights, where nothing was ever amplified. That was the exact crossover of the very last shows of The Mystic Knights and the very first performances of this ska-influenced Oingo Boingo.

Burlingame: Okay.

⁴⁸ *Forbidden Zone*. Directed by Richard Elfman, 1980; *Forbidden Zone*. Forbidden Zone, 2015. DVD.

⁴⁹ Betty Boop is an animated character who originally appeared in the *Talkartoon* and *Betty Boop* film series. She was created by Max Fleischer for Paramount Pictures and was designed as a caricature of the Jazz Age flapper with a uniquely high, identifiable voice and a catchphrase of “Boop-oop-a-doop.”

⁵⁰ “Minnie the Moocher” is a 1931 song recorded by Cab Calloway and featured in the 1932 Betty Boop cartoon *Minnie the Moocher* (Fleischer, 1932; *Betty Boop: 30 Classic Cartoons*. Echo Bridge, 2004. DVD.).

Elfman: Confusing enough? You bet. I try to even think of it and it makes me want to take a nap. I need a chalkboard, something with a Sharpie, that I could draw lines and figures. It's like *Game of Thrones*,⁵¹ isn't it?

1972	• Richard Elfman forms The Mystic Knights of Oingo Boingo (theatre troupe)
1974	• Danny Elfman joins The Mystic Knights to replace Richard as bandleader • Richard leaves to pursue filmmaking
1977	• Filming of <i>Forbidden Zone</i> begins
1978	• The Mystic Knights begin recording the soundtrack for <i>Forbidden Zone</i> • Filming of <i>Forbidden Zone</i> finishes
1979	• Danny reforms the band as <i>Oingo Boingo</i> • <i>Oingo Boingo</i> finishes the <i>Forbidden Zone</i> soundtrack
1980	• <i>Forbidden Zone</i> is released (directed by Richard Elfman, score by Danny Elfman; commercially available in 1982)

Burlingame: But Oingo Boingo clearly had success because you started to get Oingo Boingo songs placed in movies in the early 1980s, right?

Elfman: Well, yeah, so now there's this transition, [from] 1979 to 1980. Oingo Boingo [was] going out there and doing shows, playing clubs, a whole different arena, and loving the fact that [there were] no sets, no big ensembles of percussion, no costumes—just us with instruments. It seemed like heaven to me, because our show at the end [of the Mystic Knights] was multimedia. It was real complicated. I think [it involved] seven or eight set changes, two completely different ensembles of percussion that would be brought out and then removed, and film clips and animations that we commissioned. It was quite a complex show. Oingo Boingo [on the other hand was] just a guitar, a microphone and sweat. Heaven! and [we were] starting to play and starting to catch on and build a following. But once again, it was a lucky break, a lucky thing at a lucky time because we came out with a four song EP that we financed ourselves. It was way before you [could] post anything on the Internet and get discovered. If you wanted to get discovered, you printed an LP or, in this case we could only [include] four songs, it was called an EP. They did that a lot back then, either a single or an EP. (EP means 'extended play', more than two songs.)

⁵¹ *Game of Thrones* is a fantasy drama television series that aired on HBO from 2011 to 2019. Based on the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, the show follows events occurring in the fictional Westeros and Essos; some of the show's plotlines have been reviewed as convoluted and confusing. The show's cast includes Emilia Clarke, Lena Headey, Peter Dinklage, Maisie Williams, Kit Harington, and Sophie Turner among others. (Benioff and Weiss, 2011–2019; *Game of Thrones: The Complete Seasons 1-8 (Collectors Edition)*. HBO Home Entertainment, 2019. DVD.)

A DJ named Jed the Fish on KROQ Los Angeles, an alternative FM station, picked up the track and started playing it, so all of a sudden people [were] showing up to the shows and [we were] getting played on the radio. It wasn't a big radio station, but they had a great, loyal following and suddenly, everything just whooom, just crazy, getting asked to do an album. We got signed by A&M Records. We did our first album and The Police⁵² took us on tour for some shows. Miles Copeland,⁵³ their manager, became our manager for a while and so [we were] playing in front of The Police at The Forum. Two years [before], we never dreamed of this kind of thing. We were not really prepared for it in any way, but we built a following and it was really loyal. They were great. So that began a seventeen-year career with Oingo Boingo.

First Collaboration with Tim Burton: *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*

Burlingame: Okay so, how did *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* come to you?

Elfman: Right. So now, to make things more complicated: 1985—Oingo Boingo's been moving along for about six years, seven years, (depending on exactly what year you call our beginning—1979, let's say). I [got] a call from my manager, [about] whether I [should] take a meeting with this animator named Tim Burton⁵⁴ (who of course I'd never heard of) and Paul Reubens,⁵⁵ a.k.a. Pee-wee Herman.⁵⁶ [Burton had] done a movie [about] Pee-wee. Now, I was a fan of Pee-wee; I knew Pee-wee as a performer. He used to play at an L.A. improv club called The Groundlings⁵⁷ and I used to go see him, so I saw the very first incarnations of Pee-wee Herman when it was only one of Paul's several characters that he would do in the evening. I was like, "Aw yeah, Pee-wee Herman. I love Pee-wee Herman! I don't know who this kid is, the director, but I'll meet him."

⁵² The Police were a English rock band formed in 1977 by Sting, Andy Summers, and Stewart Copeland. Their songs include "Don't Stand So Close to Me" (1980), "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic" (1981), and "Every Breath You Take" (1983).

⁵³ Miles Copeland III (b. 1944) is an American music executive, co-founder of I.R.S. Records (with Jay Boberg and Carl Grasso), and musical manager. Copland managed The Police (see footnote 52), a group of which his brother Stewart was a founding member, and Oingo Boingo (see footnote 43).

⁵⁴ Tim Burton (b. 1958) is an American filmmaker, writer, animator, and artist known for his eccentric gothic films. A long-time collaborator of Danny Elfman's, Burton's acclaimed films include *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985, see footnote 46), *Beetlejuice* (1988, see footnote 75), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990, see footnote 81), *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993, see footnote 106), and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005, see footnote 119).

⁵⁵ Paul Reubens (b. 1952) is an American actor, writer, producer, television host, and comedian best known for his character Pee-wee Herman (see footnote 56). Reubens rose to fame as Pee-wee Herman in 1980 with the development and release of his stage show *The Pee-wee Herman Show*.

⁵⁶ Pee-wee Herman is a fictional character created and portrayed by comedian and actor Paul Reubens (see footnote 55). The character was originally developed as a stage act and adapted to various settings, including the 1985 film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985 see footnote 46) and television show *Pee-wee's Playhouse* (Reubens, 1986–1990; *Pee-wee's Playhouse: The Complete Series*. Shout! Factory, 2017. DVD.).

⁵⁷ The Groundlings is a Los Angeles-based improvisational sketch comedy troupe and school. Located on Melrose Avenue, The Groundlings was home to the creation of Paul Reubens's character Pee-Wee Herman (see footnote 56); the school's alumni include Will Ferrell, Phil LaMarr, Melissa McCarthy, Maya Rudolph, and Kristen Wiig.

I thought they were interested in a song because we were starting to get some songs in movies. A friend of mine, Amy Heckerling,⁵⁸ put a song in the movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*⁵⁹ and there were a few others, so I assumed that's what it was. I met with Tim and he [said], "I'd like a score." [I asked], "Why me?" And he said, "Well, I've seen Oingo Boingo and I think you could do stuff." It [turned] out that Paul Reubens had seen *Forbidden Zone* and he'd made a note, "Oh, I really like that." My name ended up on both of their lists so it was once again a fortuitous, lucky, random moment. I saw *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, a rough cut. I went home. I had a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and I recorded a demo—all the parts—made a cassette, and sent it out to them. Never expected to hear back.

About a week or two later, I [had] a call from my manager saying, "You got the job." And I thought about it. I said, "I can't take that job. Tell them I can't take the job." He [said], "Fuck off! You tell 'em you can't take the job. I've been working on this for two weeks. You want to call 'em and tell 'em you don't want to do the job? Go for it." I spent an evening looking at the phone [thinking], "I can't do this, I'll really screw up their movie. I don't know anything about this." I liked Tim. I didn't want to screw his movie up. Then, I decided: My entire life's motto at that point [had been], "Fuck it." It really summed up everything, constantly for me. "Why not?" I took the job. I never expected anybody to hear the score. I was sure that Warner Brothers would hear the score and toss it because it didn't sound like other comedies at that period. I didn't care. I didn't care if anybody heard it, and I didn't care if it got tossed. It was just like, "I'm just going to do it and if they like it, they like it. Tim's liking it. If they throw it away, then it was just an experience."

Writing for Full Orchestra and the Influence of Nino Rota's Music

Burlingame: But you did have to write for orchestra, right?

Elfman: Yeah. That brought me back then, full circle, to "Oingo Boingo Piano Concerto Number One and a Half" because when I finished doing that and started with the band, Oingo Boingo, I thought all those years of those transcriptions and that primitive writing I was doing was wasted. In a rock band, you never write anything. There's no reason to write a part. You sing parts. You play parts on a guitar. You're playing songs. You don't write things down. That's bullshit, you know. In fact, [it's] better to even act like you don't know how. You're in a band. So I said, "All those years wasted, all that energy, all that effort wasted."

Then I thought, "What a shame. I'm starting a band and I'm too old to be in a band. I'm twenty-eight, I can't be in a—" What kind of band? It can't be a punk band. I'm way too old for that. I felt like I was already old and trying to catch up in a weird way, and I had wasted all these years. I wanted them back and I couldn't get them. [Now] suddenly, I have to write this film score. I have a blank piece of paper and a video and I'm going, "Oh, okay, don't panic. Remember how you did that piece of music?" Writing for a sixty-five-piece orchestra is not that much more difficult than what I had done, because you're not writing sixty-five different pieces of music.

⁵⁸ Amy Heckerling (b. 1954) is an American film director known for her films *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982, see footnote 59) and *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995; *Clueless*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.).

⁵⁹ *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Directed by Amy Heckerling, 1982; *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004. DVD.

You've got this many strings and this many violas, violins here. Writing in ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen parts is actually fine, because those are most of your parts for the orchestra. I tried not to think of it as that many players, but just [about] how many parts I [needed to write]. Oh, I see, this particular key only has seven or eight things happening. This is really not that difficult.

Once I got my mind wrapped around the intimidation of it and I started getting pencil on paper again, I learned very quickly how to make the timings work against the picture. I found that in the process of scoring *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, that I had a feel for that. So, in the same way that I learned, much earlier, that if I listened to a piece of music, I could kind of freeze it and transcribe it fairly accurately, I learned on *Pee-wee* that I could find the tempo of the scene. I wanted to try to make the music feel like the editor had edited it to my music instead of the other way around. I think that if you find their tempo, it's really not that hard to do. In this case, it was an editor named Billy Weber.⁶⁰ I would look at these scenes and I would find where his internal tempo was, and if I hit it right, everything fell right on. Cuts would happen, like bam, bam, bam, boom. Amazing, right where I wanted it to cut. It [meant that I was] locked into his tempo. I really loved it. It was a great challenge, and technically it was incredibly difficult, but I really enjoyed that.

Burlingame: There's a real Nino Rota⁶¹ vibe to some of it.

Elfman: Well, Nino Rota. I guess I left out that part of my life, because as a teenager/young adult, my movie-going went from the Baldwin Hills⁶² movie theater to the Fox Venice⁶³ and the Nuart,⁶⁴ the repertoire houses. When not waiting tables or rehearsing at night with The Mystic Knights, [I was] at one of those theaters. I saw four, six movies a week, because they played everything. There I became a huge fan of Fellini's⁶⁵ films. You would see Fellini and

⁶⁰ Billy Weber is an American film editor. Weber's credits include *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985, see footnote 46), *Top Gun* (Scott, 1986; *Top Gun*. Paramount Entertainment, 2004; DVD.), and *The Thin Red Line* (Malick, 1986; *The Thin Red Line*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD).

⁶¹ Nino Rota (1911–1979) was an Academy Award-winning Italian composer, pianist, and conductor. A prolific film composer, Rota was a frequent collaborator of directors Federico Fellini (see footnote 65) and Luchino Visconti. Rota's best-known credits include *The Godfather* (Ford Coppola, 1972; *The Godfather: 3-Movie Collection*. Paramount Entertainment, 2015. DVD.), *La dolce vita* (Fellini, 1960; *La dolce vita*. Criterion Collection, 2014. DVD.), and *Romeo & Juliet* (Zeffirelli, 1968; *Romeo & Juliet*. Paramount Entertainment, 2000. DVD.).

⁶² The Baldwin Theatre at 3741 S. La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California. It closed in 1984.

⁶³ The Fox Theatre at 620 Lincoln Boulevard, Venice, California. The building is now an indoor flea market.

⁶⁴ The Nuart Theatre at 11272 Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles, California.

⁶⁵ Federico Fellini (1920–1993) was an Italian film director and screenwriter regarded as one of the most influential and important filmmakers in cinematic history. His films include *La Strada* (Fellini, 1954; *La Strada*. Criterion Collection, 2010. DVD.) *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960; *La dolce vita*. Criterion Collection, 2014. DVD), and *8½* (Fellini, 1963; *8½*. Criterion Collection, 2001. DVD.).

Kurosawa.⁶⁶ You'd see [François] Truffaut⁶⁷ and Roman Polanski⁶⁸ on the same night for a dollar. It was an incredible time to love film, to live in Los Angeles and have so many things all around you. Nino Rota connected with me immediately. I'm sorry I didn't mention that earlier, but when I saw the first cut of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, it felt like a quirky Italian comedy to me. I said, "This isn't like an American [comedy]. This is like an absurd French or Italian comedy," maybe because it was in a bicycle race and it was about a bike. I locked instantly into my guiding driving force, being Nino Rota for that, clearly. I felt his spirit fill me at that moment.

Burlingame: Obviously, this worked for you. Was it a kind of epiphany? Did you all of a sudden, after *Pee-wee*, think, "Wow, this may be my new career?"

Elfman: No.

Burlingame: Did you think it was a one-off at that point?

Elfman: I thought it was a one-off. Like I said, I didn't think anybody would ever hear the score. So, I thought to myself, "It's a great experience for me, but it's not going to have any resonance in my life and it was a lucky break. Film music was in a weird place at that point in the 1980s. Somewhere between the 1970s and the 1980s, film music had become confused. In the 1960s into the '70s, the whole idea of an orchestral score was dissipating. People didn't really know what to put in. [You had a] whole new wave of directors. The studio system had imploded—these new directors basically [were] in charge of their films in a different way than studios were used to. The studio bosses were gone. What kind of music do you put? Well, a lot of jazzy stuff. John Williams⁶⁹ stepped in and defined, "Okay, no—for an action-adventure fantasy, we're going right

⁶⁶ Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) was an acclaimed Japanese film director and screenwriter considered to be one of the most important filmmakers of all time. His films include *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa, 1954; *Seven Samurai*. Criterion Collection, 2006. DVD.), *Red Beard* (Kurosawa, 1965; *Red Beard*. Criterion Collection, 2002. DVD.), and *Kagemusha* (Kurosawa, 1980; *Kagemusha*. Criterion Collection, 2007. DVD.).

⁶⁷ François Truffaut (1932–1984) was a French filmmaker and producer. A founder of the French New Wave, Truffaut's films include *The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959; *The 400 Blows*. Criterion Collection, 2017. DVD.), *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973; *Day for Night*. Criterion Collection, 2015. DVD.), and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Truffaut, 1977; *Close Encounters of the Third Kind: 30th Anniversary Ultimate Edition*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.).

⁶⁸ Roman Polanski (b. 1933) is a French-Polish film director, producer, and writer. His best-known films include *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968; *Rosemary's Baby*. Paramount Entertainment, 2000. DVD.), *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974; *Chinatown*. Paramount Entertainment, 2017. DVD.), and *The Ghost Writer* (Polanski, 2010; *The Ghost Writer*. Summit Entertainment, 2010. DVD.).

⁶⁹ Considered one of the greatest composers in film music history, John Williams (b. 1932) is a multi-award-winning American composer, conductor, and pianist with a musical career of over sixty years. His critically acclaimed film scores include *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975; *Jaws*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.), the *Star Wars* series (1977–current, see footnote 71), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982; *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.), *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993; *Schindler's List*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.), and many others. He has also composed classical works for orchestral and chamber ensembles and served as the principal conductor for the Boston Pops Orchestra from 1980 to 1993.

back to [Erich] Korngold.⁷⁰ Go right back to the source.” *Star Wars*⁷¹ brought back the orchestra again in a big, bold way, but for comedies, there was nothing so clear. It was just a little this and a little that—pop music, guitars, jazzy—there was nothing to define it. When *Pee-wee* came out, I was lucky enough to hit a period when it didn’t sound like anything else. Suddenly, everybody wanted that sound in their quirky comedies, and I was offered every quirky comedy made in Hollywood. I was the ‘quirky comedy guy,’ and that surprised me.

Splitting Time Between Composing for Film and Oingo Boingo

Burlingame: But obviously you weren’t intimidated by the process because almost immediately you were working fairly regularly. You did half a dozen movies in the next couple years.

Elfman: Yeah, I was hungry at that point. When I heard the orchestra play, the first cue we did was the bicycle race in *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. This gigantic [orchestra] played it back (now it seems like a really small orchestra—sixty-five or sixty-seven pieces.) I’d never heard anything like that up close. I’d never stood in front of an orchestra. I’d never heard an orchestra play, other than [from] the audience on a concert stage. It was really very addictive. I’m very adrenaline based, and always have been; I got a real adrenaline rush from that, so it was kind of like getting my first shot of heroin. Although I didn’t expect anything to come from that, I definitely had it in my blood now. I really enjoyed that. I liked the challenge. I liked the fact that it was totally different from anything I was prepared to do in my life, and I liked [its] sound.

Suddenly, all these offers were coming in. “Well,” [I asked myself], “Now what do I do? I’m in a band. I’m touring. I write all the material for the band. I have to produce the records.” I went through ten years where I tried to do both, as best I could. I tried to do two film scores a year in and around Oingo Boingo’s schedule. In the early days, it was so difficult that I remember when I got *Midnight Run*,⁷² and a couple of others, I would take my salary, whatever it was, I’d split it in half and pay the band half of my salary to allow me to take some time off to do the film. I don’t think they were too happy about it, but it was a hard ten years. I was going constantly, night and day. We didn’t have MIDI demos for film scoring, so I had to write down all the parts. I would make a demo, play it for the director, and then sit down and write every part on paper. I was working sixteen hours a day. I really was. Then every moment I wasn’t scoring, I was saying, “Okay, now I’m four weeks behind the Oingo Boingo schedule. I got to get down. I got to start writing some new songs. We have a tour coming up,” and I would catch up with that. It was absolutely insane [for] ten years.

Orchestrating with Steve Bartek

⁷⁰ Erich Korngold (1897–1957) was an Austrian-American composer and conductor considered to be one of the most influential film composers in history. His film scores include *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz and Keighley, 1938; *The Adventures of Robin Hood: Special Edition*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.) and *The Sea Hawk* (Curtiz, 1940; *The Sea Hawk*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.).

⁷¹ *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*. Directed by George Lucas, 1977; *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope: Special Edition*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004. DVD.

⁷² *Midnight Run*. Directed by Martin Brest, 1988; *Midnight Run*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

Burlingame: How helpful was Bartek in this? Because I understand he had actually started to take some orchestration lessons.

Elfman: No, no, when I did *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* I was like, "All right, I'm going to need an orchestrator to help." I didn't know who to turn to, so I asked Steve. I said, "Did you ever take any orchestration lessons?" He said, "I took some classes at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]." I said, "You got it." So *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* [was] my first composition, Steve's first time orchestrating, Tim's first feature. There were a lot of firsts. [Steve] learned orchestration at the same time I learned composition, and it was literally like, "Yeah, that's good, you took a class, you finished the class, right?" "Yeah, I finished the class." "Good enough."

Burlingame: And the other thing about the late 1980s is that you weren't just pegged as a comedy guy it seems, because *Midnight Run* was an action comedy and although *Back to School*⁷³ was a comedy, and *Wisdom*⁷⁴ was a drama.

Collaborating with Tim Burton and Martin Brest

Elfman: Each film of Tim's would open another door. That's how it worked. In other words, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* led to *Back to School* and movies like that. *Beetlejuice*⁷⁵ came out and I got all kinds of much crazier offers. Martin Brest,⁷⁶ who did *Midnight Run*—[Laughs]. [There are] so many—I don't know how to condense [it] all. I used to hang with Marty when I was with The Mystic Knights. Remember I told you about those film clips in between our sets when we did costume changes [for] The Mystic Knights? That was Marty who shot them and was in them in a loin cloth, hitting a gong in like the signature Rank⁷⁷ films, except in our version, he starts with the gong, then he hits it again and has a heart attack and—it's a long story.

I was in Marty's first student film at AFI [American Film Institute] called *Hot Tomorrows*.⁷⁸ He wanted an ensemble, a cabaret band to be playing in a club while Hervé Villechaize,⁷⁹ who was the star of *Hot Tomorrows*, gives a speech. [We were] that group, so Marty and I go back to the very beginning. Now Marty said, "I'm a film director! I did a movie!" He came out with

⁷³ *Back to School*. Directed by Alan Metter, 1986; *Back to School: Extra-Curricular Edition*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

⁷⁴ *Wisdom*. Directed by Emilio Estevez, 1986; *Wisdom*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.

⁷⁵ *Beetlejuice*. Directed by Tim Burton, 1988; *Beetlejuice: 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition*. Warner Home Video, 2008. DVD.

⁷⁶ Martin Brest (b.1951) is an American director, producer, and screenwriter. His directorial credits include the films *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest, 1984; *Beverly Hills Cop Collection*. Paramount Entertainment, 2007. DVD.), *Midnight Run* (1988, see footnote 72), and *Scent of a Woman* (Brest, 1992; *Scent of a Woman*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 1998. DVD.).

⁷⁷ The Rank Organisation was a British entertainment conglomerate. Founded in 1937 by J. Arthur Rank, the vertically integrated company owned facilities that allowed it to produce, distribute, and exhibit its own productions. It also manufactured and distributed consumer electronics. The Organisation's films include *The Seventh Veil* (Bennett, 1945; *The Seventh Veil*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.) and *Great Expectations* (Lean, 1946; *Great Expectations*. Criterion Collection, 1999. DVD.).

⁷⁸ *Hot Tomorrows*. Directed by Martin Brest, 1977; *Hot Tomorrows*. Library of Congress. DVD.

⁷⁹ Hervé Villechaize (1943–1993) was a French-American actor known for his roles in the 1974 James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* (Hamilton, 1974; *The Man with the Golden Gun*. MGM Video & DVD, 2015. DVD.) and the American television series *Fantasy Island* (Levitt, 1977–1984; *Fantasy Island: The Complete First Season*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.).

Midnight Run. He [asked], “Hey Danny, you’ve done ten films or something. How about doing my movie?” And I [said], “Sure, okay,” but essentially, between each of Tim’s movies, I was doing four films. Because *Pee-wee* was one, *Beetlejuice* was five, *Batman*⁸⁰ was ten. *Edward Scissorhands*⁸¹ might have broken out mid-fourteen instead of fifteen, but more or less, that’s the way it was working. Tim would go, “How are you doing all these other films in between my films?” And I would go, “If I wasn’t, I couldn’t be doing your next film,” because *Beetlejuice* required skills that I didn’t have on *Pee-wee*. Had I not done nine films before *Batman*, I couldn’t possibly have taken it on. Because I was—schooling is what I was doing. Every time I did a score, I tried to do something I’d never done before, trying to add that to my toolkit, as it were. Still, only nine chances, and most of them silly.

Scoring for *Batman*

Burlingame: Well, let’s talk about *Batman*, which was by far the biggest movie you had done to date. This again was Tim Burton. I’m curious to know how difficult the whole process was. There was even a rumor at some point that Prince,⁸² who was Warner Brothers’ biggest music star at the time, was going to write the score.

Elfman: Well, there was that period. *Batman* was my tenth film, and as I [now] approach [my] one hundredth film – it was by far the hardest thing I’ve ever worked on and the most excruciating personal experience because of how it went down. Tim [brought] me into *Batman*. Nobody [else] wanted me. Jon Peters,⁸³ the producer, didn’t want me on *Batman*. He wanted to bring in Prince and Michael Jackson⁸⁴ and George Michael⁸⁵ originally. Then of course the studio [wanted] somebody experienced. I’d only done comedies. They wanted John Williams, or somebody like John Williams, to do *Batman*. Only Tim was there: “I think Danny is okay with this.” Nobody else was.

The first time I went out to visit the Gotham City set, Jon [Peters] [took] me out, and Bob Badami,⁸⁶ my music editor. He shows us Gotham. Tim is shooting, I hadn’t been onto the set yet

⁸⁰ *Batman*. Directed by Tim Burton, 1989; *Film Favorites: Batman Collection*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.

⁸¹ *Edward Scissorhands*. Directed by Tim Burton, 1990; *Edward Scissorhands: 25th Anniversary Edition*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2015. DVD.

⁸² Best known as Prince, Prince Nelson (1958–2016) was an acclaimed American singer-songwriter, musician, record producer, and dancer considered one of the most influential musical artists of his time. Prince is known for his use of synthesizers and his role in the creation of the Minneapolis sound, a subgenre of funk rock. His popular songs include “When Doves Cry” (1984), “Purple Rain” (1984), and “Little Red Corvette” (1983).

⁸³ Jon Peters (b. 1945) is an American film producer whose credits include *Caddyshack* (Ramis, 1980; *Caddyshack*. Warner Home Video, 1997. DVD.), *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985; *The Color Purple*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.), and *Batman* (1989, see footnote 80).

⁸⁴ Often called the “King of Pop,” Michael Jackson (1958–2009) was an acclaimed American singer, songwriter, and dancer. He began his career as the youngest member of his family band the Jackson 5. Jackson’s 1982 album *Thriller* produced such hits as “Beat It” (1982), “Billie Jean” (1982), and “Thriller” (1982).

⁸⁵ George Michael (1963–2016) was an English singer, songwriter, and record producer who, along with Andrew Ridgeley, formed the musical duo Wham! in 1981. The group’s songs include “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go” (1984) and “Last Christmas” (1984). Michael’s solo songs include “Careless Whisper” (1984), “A Different Corner” (1986), and “Faith” (1987).

⁸⁶ Bob Badami (b. 1951) is an American music editor and supervisor. His credits include *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993, see footnote 106), the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series (Verbinski, 2003–2007; *Pirates of the*

where he was, and [Jon] tells me his concept, “We’ll have Michael Jackson write the Batman theme and Prince will do The Joker’s theme and George Michael will do the love theme.” I’m getting grim, and Bob’s walking between us—he’s slowly moving us apart. I didn’t realize this until later, [but] he knew we were both very volatile; at that point in my life, I was. [Bob] could sense that shit was going to happen. I say, “Oh, really? What’ll I do?” And he says, “You can be the captain of the ship.” I say, “I don’t like ships. I don’t like sailing. I don’t like water.” And this is how we started.

Coming Up with the *Batman* Theme

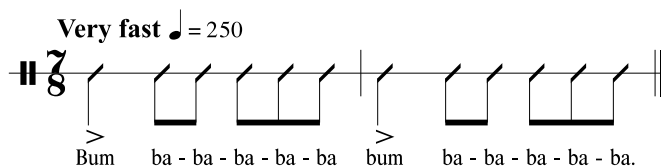
I went back to L.A. and I met with Tim. In the meantime, coming back to Los Angeles on the [Boeing] 747 from Gotham City after this weird meeting, I get the *Batman* theme in my head. So, I spent the entire flight running in and out of this noisy bathroom because I have a guy sitting next to me with a tape recorder going, “Well, here’s the thing, because I’m really okay—” (makes mumble noises). First, the rhythm is like this (musical mumbles), and I’m doing part after part after part. First French horns, second French horns, trombones, and strings. I had nothing as a pitch reference, [I just wrote] it on a napkin. That takes a talent called ‘solfege’ where you don’t need a keyboard in front of you. I’m one hundred percent reliant on a keyboard. Since then, I carry a little keyboard with me, only this big, that’s all I need, but I have to have keys to be able to write. In this sense, I was stuck to a tape recorder trying to make sense of about twenty times on-and-off. [Finally, I came] out of the bathroom and two flight attendants there [asked], “Are you okay?” “Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine.” “All right, we just thought maybe you were ill. You’re not ill?” “No, no, I’m fine, I’m fine,” and ten minutes later—back in there again. Okay, [the flight attendants], they’re all getting worried. They’ve got a drug addict who’s what, going in there and just snorting every ten minutes? What is he doing? And they’re all looking at me. [I was] all fired up because I knew the airplane was going to land and if I didn’t get it all nailed, they’d play a Beatles⁸⁷ song and it was all going to be gone. They landed and it was “Hey Jude.”⁸⁸ “Hey Jude” is a melody eraser of major proportions. You could try to have anything as solidly in your mind as you think you could possibly have it, but when—[sings “Hey Jude” melody]—it’s gone, because now all you’re thinking is what melody I had, I had something really good in my mind; it was the *Batman* theme, it’s gone forever.” And that’s how it went down.

I get home, and I run down to my studio. I was thinking, “Oh, this tape better have [what I wrote]—” and all I heard on the tape was this noise, because it’s this really loud bathroom in those old 747s. I could [only] hear just a little bit, okay, just, ba-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum.

Caribbean: 1–4 Box Set. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2012. Blue-ray.), and *Sherlock Holmes* (Ritchie, 2009; *Sherlock Holmes*. Warner Home Video, 2010. DVD.).

⁸⁷ The Beatles were an English rock band formed in 1960 by John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. Considered one of the most influential and revolutionary bands of all time, the Beatles released such hits as “Love Me Do” (1962), “Hey Jude” (1968, see footnote 88), “From Me to You” (1963), “All You Need Is Love” (1967), and “Let It Be” (1970).

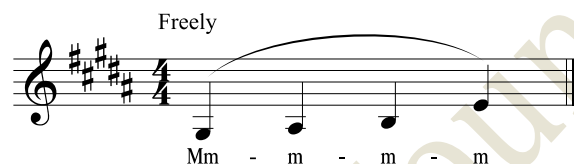
⁸⁸ “Hey Jude” is a 1968 song by the English rock band The Beatles (see footnote 87). An international chart-topping single, “Hey Jude” is one of the band’s most popular songs.



Okay, okay, I got the rhythm. Da-dum-dum, I got my pitch, okay, yeah. [sings rhythm on pitch]:



I hear [hums]:



Finally, it all came back to me. I wrote seven or eight pieces, variations right on the spot. I said, “I have a good theme.” I don’t know what it is, but I got the faster and the slower version of it. I get a call saying for me to stay on the score, [but] I have to collaborate with Prince. We’d be co-composers. Now everything [was] upside down.

[To the interviewer] I know we’re supposed to only take up so much time, but hey, you asked the question [laughs].

Collaborating Attempt with Prince and Getting Re-Hired for *Batman*

I was screwed at this point, and I spent many sleepless nights. I knew I [wasn’t] a collaborator. My collaboration is with the director; my collaboration is with another brain, and that’s the director’s brain, not with another musician. I also knew that I would do all the work and Prince would get all the credit, meaning that I would essentially be the orchestrator and he would come up with the tunes. I was also not very pragmatic at that point. I didn’t really believe that my career—I loved scoring, but I wasn’t desperate. I tried to remember the center of my entire belief system about everything, which [was] still, “Fuck them all.” I said, “I’m not going to do it, I quit.” And I said, “I may have just screwed myself, but I have to do this. I just can’t do it.” I just couldn’t find a way to subjugate myself that way. I had to let Prince go off and write a score, and he did.

I spent a month beating myself up, thinking, “I just totally fucked my career. I’m going to be one of those guys that did ten movies and never did another, and they’ll [ask], “What happened to him?” They’d [say], “Because [he] passed up the biggest fucking movie of the year, and was stupid enough to walk away from it,” and [they’d be] right. It was the dumbest thing I’ve ever done. How could I be so stupid? And then I get a call saying, “Tim just auditioned demos of the

score, that synced into the picture. He'd like you to come to England, you're back on the film." I let Tim know, "I'm here for you if you need me. I'm not quitting you, but I can't do this with him. You know, he's going to have to do his own thing." I was rehired. To this day, it was probably the hardest month of my life. I really felt like I just screwed up bad, that my ego and my temperament [were] not going to allow me to have a career that was going to last.

Burlingame: But you wound up doing the right thing for you?

Elfman: Yeah, I did, in the end, but who would know that before then? You know, sometimes you've got to make these calls, and the call just seems like such a bad idea until the fact that it actually works out. Then of course, in hindsight, obviously it was the right thing to do. I so wanted some future person to come back and visit me at night and go, "Danny, don't worry. I'm from the future, trust me. It'll be okay." There was no comforting voice. There was nothing, other than, "You fucked yourself." That's all I heard every night when I went to bed. "You idiot. You could've done something, and you just walked away from it." It was a brutal period.

I have to end the story with this, because I just talked about this shit about Jon Peters and I almost having a fight. He had taught me how to do a sucker punch, by the way, because he's into boxing. He knew that I was into boxing, and he was a tough character. He was at my studio with Tim, and I was playing one piece and then another and then another, and he wasn't sold. Tim [said], "Play the march, play the march, play the march." I go, "Oh, yeah." At that point I didn't know how to present pieces of music to a producer. I didn't know there's a way you do it, to make them understand it, that's simpler. I played him what's now the main title, the piece I wrote on the airplane, and he jumped up in his chair and started conducting.

To his credit, still to this very day—because he could've just persisted in "I'm-an-asshole-and-he's-not-going-to-make-things-easier-for-me"—he became my strongest advocate. He loved the score. He would hold up the phone while we were recording in London. He'd play it for people as it was playing, [he'd say], "This is great." He took me aside: "We're going to do a second soundtrack album of your score." I [said], "Yeah, nah, I know, I know it's going to be just a Prince album. I'm cool. I get it. It's marketing. They're going to sell a lot of records." And he said, "No, no, we're going to have two soundtracks." I said, "No one's ever done that." He said, "We are," and he did. So, I could only follow the shit talk story about Jon Peters by capping it off with, "Man, did he really come through for me in the best way." He did. In fact, the first time I'm aware of, there are song and score, two separate album soundtracks for the movie, so it really did work out. That tough character turned out to be great.

Burlingame: That's 1989. And that was the biggest movie of the year—

Elfman: [Starts laughing off-screen]

Elfman: That's 1989. Alright, let's see [jokingly starts to calculate, looks at watch] we're going to be here 'til—what day is it today? It's Wednesday.

Burlingame: [Laughs] We'll pick up the pace.

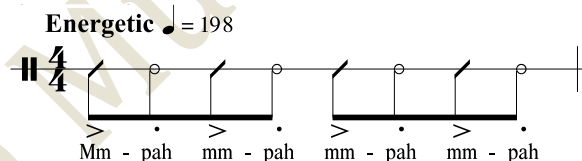
Elfman: We have cots. We'll put cots down on the floor. And we'll bring in pizza.

Composing for *Edward Scissorhands*

Burlingame: Your next Tim Burton movie is *Edward Scissorhands*, which I think is still one of the most evocative and magical scores of its time. I know it's a personal favorite of yours. I wonder if you can talk about how different an experience that was from *Batman*, and why choir was such an important part of that score.

Elfman: Well, having gone through the intense pressure and scrutiny of *Batman* with the studio, with the producers, with the executives, everybody being involved, *Edward Scissorhands* was the antithesis of that. It's almost like nobody knew we were making the score. No one asked to hear anything. It was a small movie. It was way below the radar. It was like doing *Beetlejuice*, just a movie that's so far below the radar that no one's hovering over it. Nobody's going, "So what are you guys doing? Can we hear some music?" [It was] like, "Oh, you're doing a score? Okay." So, it was just Tim and me.

When I saw *Edward* I realized, like with *Batman*, like with *Beetlejuice*, like with *Pee-wee*, I had nothing to go on for tone. That was the thing every time with Tim's movies that became obvious to me. [With] *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, I had no template to look to as a model for a comedy, "I'm going to score this like this." I just had to go, "Pfft, go Fellini, see what happens." *Beetlejuice*—I had nothing to go on. The first time they showed me the title sequence, I remember the editor or somebody, saying, "You know, we've been playing this kind of flying music because the camera is flying over the houses,"—the miniatures in *Beetlejuice*. I looked at it and [thought], "Nah, let's do the opposite." [hits fist against hand with staccato beat] "Mm-pah mm-pah mm-pah mm-pah," I said.



He was like, "Why?" I said, "Because *Beetlejuice* doesn't enter the film for like forty minutes. Let's start with where we're going to be at the end, right at the very top." "Sure, why not?" Well, [for] *Batman* there was only one template—John Williams. We didn't want to do that. Again, I had nothing to go on. There was no model of what kind of chords, how to do a darker score that's still fun and has energy. I had no idea. *Edward Scissorhands*, same exact thing, nothing to go on.

My only model was Tchaikovsky⁸⁹ fairytales. I thought, 'Score this like a fairy tale.' At that point, you know, Tim let me get away with practically anything. I was so glad that he never asked me, "Why does *Edward*'s theme sound Eastern European? Maybe even Eastern European

⁸⁹ Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) was a Russian Romantic composer best known for his six symphonies, his violin and piano concertos, and his widely popular ballets *Swan Lake* (1875–1876), *The Nutcracker* (1892), and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889).

Jewish. There's nothing about him that says *shtetl* [a small Jewish town] in Russia, Romania." It was just like, "Yeah that's cool, that's fine." So they were model-less films, musically. For *Edward* I had two themes and I couldn't decide. I didn't know which was his theme. I was still thinking, "You have to have a theme for a character," and then I was playing them with Tim, and I [said], "Let's just use them both." He [said], "Okay." And I said, "Why not?" I realized what I tried to learn from Bernard Herrmann years earlier which is there is only one rule, and that is there are no rules. I learned that from *Jason of the Argonauts*. I learned that from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. I learned that from *Psycho*. I learned that from *Vertigo*,⁹⁰ I mean, *North by Northwest*.⁹¹ There are no rules. You could do anything, can work for anything, potentially.

The Importance of a Theme

Burlingame: But I also wonder if a lot of your success is the fact that you have an innate dramatic instinct. Have you always felt that? Because when you put music to image it works dramatically. Have you always felt like you've had that inside?

Elfman: No, no, I don't know. I have no idea. I mean, I grew up with movies in my blood, not music, so when I get into a film and film score, you know, I get really into it. Other than that, my whole process is very opaque, even to me. I don't know what happens other than I get really wrapped up into it, and I get obsessive to the point where the only common denominator between me now and then is that I start getting into some melodies. I do believe that there's got to be a melody, there's got to be a theme in a score, to make it become a complete entity, and that ties back to Golden Age of film scoring. I know my infatuation with the great composers of the past. Not that I'm as good as Alex North⁹² or [Dimitri] Tiomkin⁹³ or Bernard Herrmann, or Korngold, or [Franz] Waxman,⁹⁴ I mean, any of them. They were amazing composers, but they all had the common link of being able to implant the theme and let it percolate. Then, when it finally plays at the end of the movie, it means something. Other than that, my instincts just came from watching movies, I guess.

⁹⁰ *Vertigo*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1958; *Alfred Hitchcock: Essential Collection*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

⁹¹ *North by Northwest*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1959; *Alfred Hitchcock: Essential Collection*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

⁹² Alex North (1910–1991) was an American composer best known for his film scores, notably those to the films *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Kazan, 1951; *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.), *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960; *Spartacus*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 1998. DVD.), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Nichols, 1966; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.).

⁹³ Dimitri Tiomkin (1894–1979) was a Ukrainian-American composer and conductor who trained at St. Petersburg Conservatory in Russia. He is best known for his film scores for Westerns like *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952; *High Noon*. Olive Films, 2012. DVD.), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (Sturges, 1957; *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*. Paramount Entertainment, 2017. DVD.), and *The Alamo* (Wayne, 1960; *The Alamo*. MGM Video & DVD, 2000. DVD.).

⁹⁴ Franz Waxman (1906–1967) was an American composer best known for his film scores, including to the films *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940; *Rebecca*. Criterion Collection, 2017. DVD.), *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950; *Sunset Boulevard*. Paramount Entertainment, 2017. DVD.), and *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954; *Rear Window*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.).

Burlingame: Do you think that orchestral music, which is really a lot of what you've been working in, in the last thirty years, will continue to be the vehicle that is best suited to elicit emotion from an audience?

Elfman: No, I don't think that—[the] orchestra is just a vehicle. I mean, I'm in the middle of a score right now and I'm just using piano, piano harmonics, and bowed glass; there'll be no orchestra. I don't think it's any less valid [then] when I did *Silver Linings Playbook*;⁹⁵ it was just piano, guitar, and my voice doing harmonies. I think orchestra is a vehicle and it does a certain thing, but I hear scores that are all electronic and all acoustic instruments. Anything could work. Orchestra is an amazing thing. I love writing for orchestra, but for film? I don't know. I mean, I think in a certain genre, orchestra will always do a certain thing in a certain way. Then, there'll always be other things defining other types of films.

Elfman's Writing Process

Burlingame: How do you decide? Do you take a [off] couple days after you've seen a rough cut to just fool around with different ideas and figure out exactly what you're going to use?

Elfman: Well, it's usually more than a few days. I have to get really wrapped up in it. I go through a period where I'm watching the rough cut. I'm just trying all kinds of things, just [to] see how I feel about what. Very frequently, I try to come up with an idea, a single idea. Then I'll try to do a half dozen variations on that. Then, when I feel, "Okay, that's going somewhere," I try to walk away and start from scratch again, maybe even from a hundred eighty degrees in another direction, then develop that into three, four, five, six variations. I might do that two or three more times until I feel I've explored these different roads. Also, I've got to bring the director in. "Hey, there's different ways to approach this. Here's this, but here's this." [With] Tim Burton for example, I'd always say, "This one you're probably going to hate because this one's really off the wall." I'd play the thing and about fifty percent of the time, that's the one that [became] his favorite piece in the movie, but sometimes, "Aaugh, what is that?" and [I'd say], "Forget it, just forget it, I don't know what I was thinking."

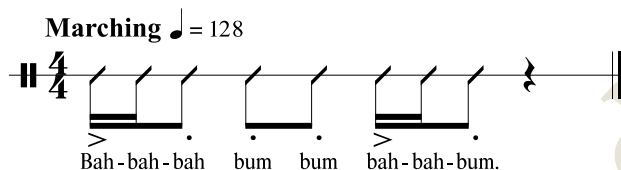
Burlingame: Do you do that often? Give the directors that you work with different options?

Milk, Mars Attack, The Hulk

Elfman: Yeah, sometimes it drives them crazy because they'd rather just be given one option. I've had complaints about that before, but I like to see their faces when they're listening to different things, seeing their own images play against different tones, different types of music. Sometimes, on occasion, it's real clear. I know exactly what it is. Sometimes I watch the rough cut and I actually hear the piece of music in my head. Like [on] *Batman*, it was that visit to Gotham City and seeing about thirty minutes of footage. I had it. I knew it. Other times I start in

⁹⁵ *Silver Linings Playbook*. Directed by David O. Russell, 2012; *Silver Linings Playbook*. Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.

one direction and end up in a completely different direction, like *Milk*,⁹⁶ for Gus Van Sant.⁹⁷ Our original idea was to do something operatic to start out, because Harvey Milk listened to opera. I wrote fifteen, seventeen, eighteen minutes of music that [were] all based on Puccini⁹⁸ and opera as the inspiration. We were listening to that, [but] no, [it just wasn't] working. I had this odd little piece of music, and he [said], "Play that one again. Play that one again," and that weird little oddball ended up becoming the titles to *Milk* and then grew into a completely different score. Sometimes, [at another] extreme, you have *Mars Attacks!*⁹⁹ We're watching the animated sequence in the beginning and I heard the piece of music that ended up in there as clearly as if there was an orchestra playing in the next room. I didn't have to do any work. [It was] already scored. [sings] Bah-bah-bah bum bum bah-bah-bum.



Every time more saucers, and more saucers, and the orchestra ramps up, then we bring in the brass, then we bring in the percussion, then we bring in the choir, and it was right there, but that only happened once. [Laughs] The other extreme would be *Milk*, where I actually worked for maybe three weeks, four weeks, on a score that we ended up completely scrapping.

Burlingame: How often can you afford to spend that kind of time? These days, schedules can be brutal.

Elfman: You know, you use what you have. It's common to have between eight and twelve weeks. You'd be surprised what you [can] do when you really get going in eight to twelve weeks. Sometimes [there are] only four or five weeks, and if there [are], I just ramp it up, just go into hyper-mode. Ang Lee¹⁰⁰ came to me saying, "I need to do the score for *The Hulk*."¹⁰¹ One hundred and three minutes in five weeks from the get-go, and I said, "That's going to be fun. There's no time for messing around here. [I just have to] hit the ground running." I loved that. Other times, there's time to write a score, throw it away, and do another, as [with] *Milk*.

Meeting Gus Van Sant and Sam Raimi

⁹⁶ *Milk*. Directed by Gus Van Sant, 2008; *Milk*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.

⁹⁷ Gus Van Sant (b. 1952) is an American director and screenwriter. His films include *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989, see footnote 104), *My Own Private Idaho* (Van Sant, 1991; *My Own Private Idaho*. Criterion Collection, 2005. DVD.), *Elephant* (Van Sant, 2003; *Elephant*. HBO Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.), and *Milk* (2008, see footnote 96).

⁹⁸ Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) was an Italian opera composer and one of the greatest advocates of *verismo*, a style of operatic realism focused on average characters and their struggles. A leading force in Italian opera, Puccini's best-known works include *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), and *Turandot* (1924).

⁹⁹ *Mars Attacks!*. Directed by Tim Burton, 1996; *Mars Attacks!*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

¹⁰⁰ Ang Lee (b. 1954) is a Taiwanese filmmaker and producer. His films include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee, 2000; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2016. DVD.), *Hulk* (2003, see footnote 101), *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005; *Brokeback Mountain*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006. DVD.), and *Life of Pi* (Lee, 2012; *Life of Pi*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.).

¹⁰¹ *Hulk* (also known as *The Hulk*). Directed by Ang Lee, 2003; *Hulk*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

Burlingame: So, we've talked a little bit about Gus Van Sant. We've talked a little bit about Tim Burton. Talk to me a little bit about Sam Raimi,¹⁰² who I presume you met on *Darkman*.¹⁰³

Elfman: Yeah, I was a big Raimi fan, as I was a big Gus fan. I put the word out with Gus after I saw *Drugstore Cowboy*.¹⁰⁴ [Raimi] was on this short list—if he ever calls, it's just yes. My girlfriend [Caroline Thompson],¹⁰⁵ who was a writer and who I lived with, actually wrote *Edward Scissorhands*. We met on *Edward Scissorhands*, and we worked on *Nightmare Before Christmas*¹⁰⁶ together. Her agent handled Gus. She came in one day and said, "Remember that Gus Van Sant? He was wondering if he could call you." Yes! It was just like that. That led to *To Die For*.¹⁰⁷

The same thing with Sam Raimi. *Evil Dead II*,¹⁰⁸ oh my God, that was one of my favorite movies. I've seen *Evil Dead II* fifty times. Funny story there is that my wife, Bridget Fonda,¹⁰⁹ also was a fan of *Evil Dead II* and both of us put the word out. We said we'd love to do anything for Sam. So, I got a call from Raimi to meet on *Darkman*. [Bridget] had already auditioned and didn't get the part for the lead in *Darkman*. We didn't know each other at all then, but I met Sam and it was just like, yeah.

Of course, Sam's way to bring me into the fold was different. I met him on a downtown set in the middle of the night in the winter after a show at Universal Amphitheater that I'd just played. I went to meet him, and he [said], "Hey buddy, how are you? Love to meet you. You're great, great, great. Here, we're going to do this thing. You okay? You want to help us out? Yeah. Okay, put on this raincoat." [Sam] put a raincoat on me and [said], "Now get this bucket of water. You're going to stand here." "Okay." "Now all this water's going to come down. When I say go, that guy in there with the banjos, Liam Neeson,¹¹⁰ he's going to come stumbling out. You throw

¹⁰² Sam Raimi (b. 1959) is an American filmmaker and producer. His best-known films include the *Evil Dead* film series (1978–2013, see footnote 108), *Spider-Man* film series (2002–2007, see footnote 134), and *Darkman* (1990, see footnote 103).

¹⁰³ *Darkman*. Directed by Sam Raimi, 1990; *Darkman Trilogy*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.

¹⁰⁴ *Drugstore Cowboy*. Directed by Van Sant, 1989; *Drugstore Cowboy*. Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 1999. DVD.

¹⁰⁵ Caroline Thompson (b. 1956) is an American screenwriter, director, producer, and novelist. As a screenwriter, her credits include *Edward Scissorhands* (1990, see footnote 81) and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993, see footnote 106).

¹⁰⁶ *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Directed by Henry Selick, 1993; *The Nightmare Before Christmas: Two-Disc Collector's Edition*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.

¹⁰⁷ *To Die For*. Directed by Gus Van Sant, 1995; *To Die For*. Image Entertainment, 2010. DVD.

¹⁰⁸ *Evil Dead II*. Directed by Sam Raimi, 1987; *Evil Dead II*. Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2016. DVD.

¹⁰⁹ Bridget Fonda (b. 1964) is a retired American actress with over forty screen credits. She was nominated for a Golden Globe Award for *No Ordinary Baby* [also known as *After Amy*] (Werner, 2001; *4 Movie Lifetime Collection*. Echo Bridge Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.) and *Scandal* (Caton-Jones, 1989; *Scandal*. Anchor Bay, 2006. VHS.), a Primetime Emmy Award for *In the Gloaming* (Scheffer, 1997; *In the Gloaming*. HBO Home Video, VHS.), and many other awards. Her other credits include *Point of No Return* (Badham, 1993; *Point of No Return*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.) and *A Simple Plan* (1998; see footnote 112). She is the daughter of actor Peter Fonda, granddaughter of Henry Fonda, and niece of Jane Fonda.

¹¹⁰ Liam Neeson (b. 1952) is an Irish actor best known for his roles in *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993; *Schindler's List*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.), *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996; *Michael Collins*. Warner Archive Collection, 2016. Blu-ray.), and *Taken* (Morel, 2009; *Taken*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.).

the water on him. Okay? You're a car driving by and you're going to—" Well, we shot that ten times, I was drenched to the bone. I got a cold from it, but [laughs] it was his way of saying hello. Of course, by the time I'd been through that, [there was] no way I wasn't going to score the film.

On *Army of Darkness*,¹¹¹ once again, "I know you don't have any money, I'll give you a title piece for a dollar." It was the first of my dollar pieces. My wife, Bridget, again before me: "I know you don't have any money. I'll do a cameo if you want me to do a cameo for a dollar." She does a cameo in it. I did the theme. We still had never met until finally the next movie he did, which was *Simple Plan*¹¹²—that's where we met.

Composing for *A Simple Plan*

Burlingame: Let's talk about that for a second. I think *A Simple Plan* is one of your most interesting scores ever. There's something terribly unsettling about that music that you wrote for that movie. I wonder if you could talk for a second about that, I think that's just a great score. Can you talk about how you conceived that?

Elfman: I loved writing *Simple Plan*. I mean, first off, I just love a good, simple, dark story like that, and I was so proud of Sam that it was not cartoony and melodramatic. It was so different for him. I just dove into that so enthusiastically, and I heard all these weird sounds in my head. Because of the location, I wanted to use banjo and these out of tune pianos. I just had this thing in my head of low flutes, a flute chorale. I had eight flutes and it was just heaven for me.

Composing for *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

Burlingame: You mentioned *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. That's a terribly important credit in your filmography, and I think maybe one of your most popular scores. It's funny, it was kind of a cult movie, but now I think it's bigger than ever, certainly bigger than it was when it came out. Plus you sang, as well as wrote the songs.

Elfman: Yeah—*Nightmare*, again, was Danny heaven because Tim approached me to get involved and I [said], "Yeah, okay. Let's do a musical, a musical like what?" [He said], "We don't know. We don't want it to sound like a Disney musical. We don't want it to sound like a Broadway show. What do we want it to sound like? Well, anything that's not a Disney musical or a Broadway show." Okay, so we know what it's not; we don't know what it is. The script wasn't coming along, and there was already a studio. Henry Selick¹¹³ was already up and running. Tim was just like, "We got to get some stuff going. Let's just start in on the songs." It was beautiful, the way we did it. He [Tim] would just show up. I was living at that point at Caroline Thompson's house. It was before she was even writing [the script to *Nightmare*]—there

¹¹¹ *Army of Darkness*. Directed by Sam Raimi, 1993; *Army of Darkness*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2016. DVD.

¹¹² *A Simple Plan*. Directed by Sam Raimi, 1998; *A Simple Plan*. Paramount Entertainment, 2017. DVD.

¹¹³ Henry Selick (b. 1952) is an American stop motion director, producer, and writer. His film credits include *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993, see footnote 106), *James and the Giant Peach* (Selick, 1996; *James and the Giant Peach: Special Edition*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.), and *Coraline* (Selick, 2009; *Coraline*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.).

was another writer originally. [Tim], he'd bring over drawings, and he'd [explain], "This is Jack Skellington, [he] pops out; and this is all the residents." I would hear that kind of thing. He had some lyrics that he'd already done. I'd go, "Okay, okay, got it!" and I'd send him off. And I would just *go!* I set up a little makeshift studio in Caroline's garage, and I wrote the first song. Demoed it up, did the lyrics. Three days later I said, "Tim, check it out."

"Cool, yeah, great."

"Now what happens?"

"All right, now Jack is wandering out there and he's feeling so lonely."

Tim's showing me the pictures. He has a few lines—for the earlier songs Tim had some really nice lyrics and lines that really got me going. I wrote "Jack's Lament." Piece by piece, about every three days, I wrote another song, and Tim came and listened until we had ten songs. I was like, "Oh, we have a whole story here, and now Henry can start working." At that point, I said, "Wow, somebody's got to write the script." Caroline—hands in the air—"Me, me, hello, hello, I'm right here, hello!" I say, "Oh yeah, Caroline, let's—"

Tim invited her to write the script, and she did. She'd been listening to all the music, driving her crazy. She really wanted to do that [script], so, it was the simplest thing we've ever done, really, because we were just messing around. Once again, because there was no template, there was no temp,¹¹⁴ no style of music. At the end of all these demos, we had to go into the studio and record all the demos for Henry, with clicks¹¹⁵ and locked down.¹¹⁶ I got all the instrumentals [recorded, and] we spent one whole night in the studio where I did all the voices of all the parts except Sally's. I brought in somebody to sing "Sally's Song." Tim was the producer on the other side of the glass, "Okay let's do the next one." Bang-bang-bang-bang, we just banged through them all. It was so simple, and so fun.

Once again, not knowing how to do it, having no template to work with, and having to invent the whole way to do it from scratch, with neither of us having really any clue how [we were] supposed to start putting together a musical. Not knowing what we were doing proved to be an asset rather than a detriment. I would say that for much of the early part of my career, that was true. Doing something from scratch and knowing nothing about it can be a tremendous asset. Now, there was still another year and a half to go on the project, to finish it up. It was a long haul, but that's how *Nightmare* came about.

Burlingame: And now you're back on stage singing those songs again to sold out houses in London and L.A.

¹¹⁴ A temp, or temporary, score is a collection of existing music (generally taken from released film, television, or video game soundtrack albums) that is temporarily edited into a film by music or picture editors in order to capture the desired feeling of a scene during the editing process. Once an original score is composed, the temp score is removed.

¹¹⁵ Referring to the "click track," an electronically generated metronomic pulse that helps media composers and musicians synchronize their music to events happening on screen.

¹¹⁶ That is, locked to picture, so that the music is exactly timed to the events on screen.

***Nightmare Before Christmas* Getting a “Second Life”**

Elfman: Yeah, it’s weird, because as you said the movie was not successful. It broke my heart, actually, when it came out because it was clear that Disney had no idea what to do with [it]. I remember finishing the one kid’s preview they had, and the kids didn’t understand it at all. It was unfinished demos and still pencil drawings sometimes in-between. They were expecting *Aladdin* or something, and they got this. They were like, “Ugh.” I heard a producer talking to an executive saying, “Well, clearly it’s not for kids.” I did the press junket in Florida for three days of interviews, and almost every interviewer said, “So this movie’s not for kids. Santa Claus gets tortured, is that correct?” [I said], “No, no, no, no,” three days of, “No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong.” I said, “My daughter Molly” (she must have been nine years old) “she listened to every song. She approved every song. Everything I did, Molly was the first one to hear it, and she loved the stuff, the drawings. She’s a nine-year-old girl.” I don’t know where this is coming from. The movie came out. The marketing—oh my God, my agent—after that preview, they canceled all merchandising. There was all this merchandising starting, and it all got [cancelled]. My agent said, “I’m going to finance my son’s college education with freebie merchandise.” He was going to Burger Kings and grabbing up everything free they had, and he was right. It became worth all this money.

Nobody expected it to have a second life; nothing gets a second life. *Rocky Horror Picture Show*,¹¹⁷ *Donnie Darko*,¹¹⁸ there are just those few random things that somehow get a second life in Hollywood. It’s so rare. *Nightmare* was one of those. It was really tragic, the two years of work leading into this movie coming out. It just didn’t really get seen. Then, ten years later, they’re still re-releasing it. Fifteen years later, it’s even bigger. I was with Tim in Tokyo for the opening of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,¹¹⁹ and there was *Nightmare* stuff everywhere. Every store we went in, Jack and Sally. Wow. Tim was [saying], “I haven’t even seen half this stuff.” [That was when] it occurred to me that this thing [was] really developing its own life. I couldn’t have been happier and more surprised. I’m off to Tokyo next week to perform songs from *Nightmare*.

Burlingame: Really?

Elfman: Yeah.

Composing *The Simpsons* Theme

Burlingame: I have to ask you about *The Simpsons*¹²⁰ theme.

¹¹⁷ *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Directed by Jim Sharman, 1975; *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.

¹¹⁸ *Donnie Darko*. Directed by Richard Kelly, 2001; *Donnie Darko*. Arrow Video, 2018. DVD.

¹¹⁹ *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Directed by Tim Burton, 2005; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

¹²⁰ *The Simpsons* is an American animated sitcom created in 1989 by Matt Groening (see footnote 122) and distributed by the FOX (Fox Broadcasting Company). The longest-running animated television show of all time, *The Simpsons* follows the eponymous Simpson family through their daily adventures. It features voice actors Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, and Hank Azaria among others as well as a theme song by Danny Elfman. Richard Gibbs scored the first season (1989–1990) and Alf Clausen scored the show from 1990 to 2017. As

Elfman: [smiles] Ahh—

Burlingame: You know it's been going for twenty-five years now. I guess it's maybe about a minute and twenty seconds worth of music, something like that.

Elfman: Not even.

Burlingame: Not even. I wonder if you can just talk for a second about how you got involved with that, and your reaction to the fact that it may become one of your most famous pieces.

Elfman: Yeah, it was pure luck. Stumbling into *The Simpsons* theme was much like winning the lottery. [Laughs] Oh my God, here comes another story. All right, I'll try to make it quick. In Oingo Boingo we did a show one night and got this terrible review in the *L.A. Reader*¹²¹ by a critic named Matt Groening.¹²² It was such a nasty review that I took exception. Normally, I loved our bad reviews, the worse the better. That was energy. Bad reviews and criticism and negative energy always provided a huge fuel source. That was my atomic fuel. That's what kept me going. That's what motivated me. In this one case, I really took exception because he admitted in the review that he only saw the encores. He missed the show. I wrote this letter back saying, "Fuck off!" I mean, if you're going to say what you're going to say, that's fine, but you've gotta sit through the show if you're going to write the damn review!

So, they printed the rebuttal; we had this nasty review, this nasty rebuttal, and that was that. As the years go by, I start seeing this comic in the *L.A. Weekly* called *Life in Hell*, and I said, "Matt Groening, he's that asshole who did that review." But I liked this comic, and I hated the fact that I really liked what he was doing, which means he had talent. When you really don't like somebody, you don't like them to be talented. You like them to be talentless hacks; clearly, he had talent. So now its many years later, and I get a call: "There's this show, it's called *The Simpsons*. It's an animated show, and Matt Groening created it. He wants to meet you." Ah, this will be interesting.

So, I [went] in and we talked. [They played] a pencil sketch version of the thing. I really liked them, and I liked what they did. I said, "No one's ever going to see this, never make it past a couple episodes, but it looks like fun. If you want something really retro, I'm the guy for it. If you want something contemporary and modern, I'm really the wrong one." I saw it, and it really

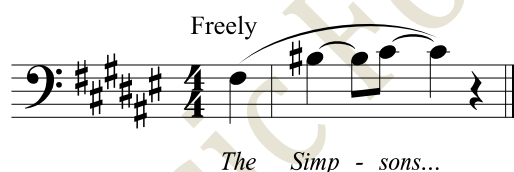
of 2021, *The Simpsons* is still airing new episodes on Fox with music by Bleeding Fingers Music (since 2017). (Groening, 1989–present; *The Simpsons: Season 1*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.)

¹²¹ *Los Angeles Reader* was a weekly paper known for having in-depth, thoughtful reviews of current concerts, theater and movies in Los Angeles County. Founding editor James Vowell hired Matt Groening as his assistant editor in 1979 and first published Groening's cartoon strip *Life in Hell* in 1980.

¹²² Matt Groening (b. 1954) is an American cartoonist, animator, writer, producer, and voice actor. He is best known for his television shows *The Simpsons* (1989–present, see footnote 120), *Futurama* (Groening, 1999–2003, 2008–2013; *Futurama: The Complete Series*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.), and *Disenchantment* (Groening, 2018–present; *Disenchantment*. Netflix Studios, 2018. Netflix.) and his comic *Life in Hell*.

brought me back to Hanna-Barbera,¹²³ *The Flintstones*.¹²⁴ In fact, the opening has a kind of *Flintstone* energy to it. You know, going to work, and car driving and the whole thing. I grew up on *The Flintstones*, so I said, “I think it should be in that mode. It should feel like kind of weird, 1960s TV.” Matt [agreed], “Yeah, cool.” As I’m leaving, we shake hands. He says, “By the way, you probably don’t remember—” but I said, “Yeah, I remember.” Laughs. He asks, “We’re cool now?” “Yeah, we’re cool.” “Yeah, that was pretty nasty what I wrote but what you wrote, you know, was pretty—sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” It was all shaking hands and hugs. I wrote it [the theme] in the car on the way home. Literally, I wrote the whole thing in the car on the way home. It was like the *Batman* thing, but I didn’t have to land and I didn’t have to hear “Hey Jude,” [so] there was no possibility of having it erased from my head. I ran down to my studio and I recorded it, once again right onto a cassette, and sent it out to them. I got a call back the next day saying, “We love it.” That was it, end of story.

I got the final version of the piece in. I had to make a few tweaks. A few weeks later, I was with the orchestra recording it and that’s the story of *The Simpsons*. I never thought it meant anything other than fun, very much like *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. In that sense it was like, this is just a goof. This is just for fun. And yeah, you’re right. If I die right now and they put on a gravestone, they probably would put, “He wrote *The Simpsons* theme. Elfman, June 1953 to 2014—and there would be little musical notes. [Laughs] You know [singing], “*The Simpsons...*”



—like that written, engraved in the stone underneath. There’s no justice. The point is that I’ve written maybe twelve or fifteen TV themes. You’ve learned not to ever expect anything, and oh wow, that one—just crazy.

Winning an Emmy Award and Oscar Nominations

Burlingame: And you got an Emmy Award for the *Desperate Housewives*¹²⁵ theme.

¹²³ Hanna-Barbera Productions, Inc. was an American animation studio founded in 1957 by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera. A leader in American television animation, Hanna-Barbera was responsible for cartoon television series like *The Flintstones* (1960–1966, see footnote 124), *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (Ruby and Spears, 1969–1970; *Scooby Doo, Where Are You!: The Complete Series*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2019. DVD.), and *The Smurfs* (Culliford, 1981–1989; *The Smurfs: The Complete 1st Season*. Warner Home Video, 2017. DVD.). The company was acquired and absorbed by Warner Bros. Animation in 2001.

¹²⁴ *The Flintstones* is an animated television show that aired from 1960 to 1966 on ABC. Produced by Hanna-Barbera (see footnote 123), *The Flintstones* tells the story of the daily lives of two neighboring families living in the Stone Age. *The Flintstones* was the longest-running animated series until *The Simpsons* (see footnote 120). (Barbera and Hanna, 1960–1966; *The Flintstones: The Complete Series*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.)

¹²⁵ *Desperate Housewives* is a mystery comedy drama that aired from 2004 to 2012 on ABC. The show follows the strange events experienced by a group of four housewives living on the fictional Wisteria Lane. It stars Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, and Eva Longoria among others. (Cherry, 2004–2012; *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Collection*. ABC Studios, 2012. DVD.)

Elfman: I guess so. I'll trust you on that.

Burlingame: I need to follow up on a phrase you used which was "negative kind of energy." You didn't get an Oscar nomination until 1997 and then you got two at once, for *Good Will Hunting*¹²⁶ and for *Men in Black*,¹²⁷ the same year. You'd been working in the business for twelve years at that point, and the Oscars had ignored you on things like *Batman* and *Edward Scissorhands*. I just wonder if that bothered you, or if you at all felt there was some injustice there?

Elfman: Me? No, I loved it. When the *Batman* nominations came out the year of *Batman*, I get this weird telegram saying, "You was robbed—Hank," and I called Richard Kraft, my agent, and I go, "I got this weird telegram. I have no idea what it means because—" "Yeah, Hank, right?" I go, "Yeah." "That's Henry Mancini,¹²⁸ idiot." And I go, "Really? That was so nice." I loved that. The disturbing part for me was when I woke up, and they said I had those two nominations, because that means I'm no longer the guy everybody hates—that's where I was comfortable being—so the hard adjustment for me was not getting overlooked early on. Bernard Hermann, except for his first ever score, was overlooked for all of his best work. I figured that's my model in life. He got bothered by that; I loved that. That's like, "Yeah, give it to me." Suddenly I had to deal with the fact that some of them actually accept me, and I have to figure out, "How do I work that into my way of perceiving the world?" I liked being the guy everybody hated.

Burlingame: I don't think people really hated you.

Elfman: Oh yeah, people really hated me. When I started out—

Burlingame: Why do you think they hated you?

Discussion on Musician's Credibility in Hollywood

Elfman: It's a weird thing in the music world that's unlike other sides of filmmaking. This is my own theory that I've developed. Many screenplay writers I've met did not necessarily study literature in school. Many directors I've met didn't study directing. Actually, directors can come from writing, from being an editor, from many different [backgrounds]—actors can often turn into directors. I should say some actors study straight up through theater and study at film school and acting school. Some don't do anything, so [there are] not any rules, and they don't really look at each other like, "Oh, he's not an actor; he never went to acting school," or, "He's not a writer, where's your degree?"

¹²⁶ *Good Will Hunting*. Directed by Gus Van Sant, 1997; *Good Will Hunting*. Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

¹²⁷ *Men in Black*. Directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997; *Men in Black*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

¹²⁸ Henry "Hank" Mancini (1924–1994) was an award-winning composer, conductor, arranger, and songwriter considered to be one of the greatest film and television composers of all time. Among his vast array of compositions are the songs "Mr. Lucky" (1960) and "Moon River" (1961). His notable scoring credits include *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961; *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Paramount Entertainment, 2017. DVD.) and *The Pink Panther* (Edwards, 1963; *The Pink Panther*. MGM Video & DVD, 1999. DVD.).

Music's an exception. Music has always been a very, very rigid set up of "you go to music school. You do it this way. You get your degree. You start out doing this. You work your way up." It's just always been thought of that way. Generally speaking, that's correct, the way it should work and does, but when you're an exception, you're immediately tagged as a hummer because it means someone who doesn't write, someone who basically comes up with a tune and hires other people to write the music. I had fifteen years of just constant "He doesn't write anything. Steve Bartek writes all of his music." Anybody who conducted for me would get composing chops. I was like gold to anybody who worked with me because everybody thought they had to be the ones that did everything.

There was a rumor in *Batman* that somebody had this magic smoking gun [showing] me singing the score to an orchestrator [laughs]. I loved that stuff. I was [at the] BMI awards for *Beetlejuice* and was sitting at a table with composers. I went up there and got my award. One composer said to another, "I heard Bill Ross¹²⁹ wrote that score." Now, Bill Ross is a great guy. Bill Ross saved my ass on *Beetlejuice* because I had—I'm not going to get into the story of the famous conductor that I hired to conduct *Beetlejuice* that went catastrophically wrong. The second day, we had to find a conductor that morning who [could] come in and do that session. It was Bill Ross. No preparation. Got a call at midnight the night before. Showed up the next morning. Did a beautiful job conducting and we managed to pull through. "I heard Bill Ross wrote that score," and then the other one said, "Yeah, me too."

And I said that kind of defined me and the music community. I loved the fact of that "[They] hate me." It just makes me stronger. When I was at the Mystic Knights, I got the worst reviews any theater group can get. When I was with Oingo Boingo, it was a rock band, [but] we were called nerd music for kids who can't dance. It was great, I love this stuff. I even printed our worst reviews in ads when I was with the Mystic Knights. I loved the idea of printing three of the worst reviews we could possibly get. I don't know what it is—it's like proving yourself to doubters is a great force. Every time I went there and did another score, I was thinking, "Oh, I'll show those fuckers. You know, this time, yeah, who you going to give this one credit to?" It fed me, so it was actually a perfect relationship. If I [could] go back in time, I wouldn't want it any differently.

I should also add that when I hear about a rock 'n roll guy, a guy coming from a band and doing a film score, I think the same thing about them, even now. I think, "Yeah, they're a hummer. They got some guy doing all the work," because it's just wired into you. The work is so intense. It's so grueling to get an entire—all the parts for every four measures of music, especially on a big score. It could just take forever. I understand why one would assume that somebody coming out of a band couldn't do that. It makes sense that they couldn't and shouldn't do that, but I was always a masochist from the get-go.

Burlingame: And you also studied a lot.

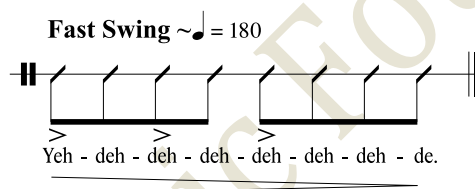
¹²⁹ William Ross (b. 1948) is an American composer, orchestrator, arranger, conductor, and music director who has worked on over one hundred and fifty films and television shows. He composed the scores to *Tuck Everlasting* (Russell, 2002; *Tuck Everlasting*. Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.) and *The Tale of Despereaux* (Fell and Stevenhagen, 2008; *The Tale of Despereaux*. Universal, 2009. DVD.). He has worked with composers like John Williams (see footnote 69) and Michael Giacchino among many others.

Elfman: I paid a lot of attention, and I applied it a lot. I put in a lot of work, but I just never studied. That meant I was coming from a place that just couldn't be acknowledged.

Finding A "Voice" in Music

Burlingame: The other interesting thing, though, is that you have a voice. Not every score perhaps, but you can often know when you're listening to an Elfman score. I wonder if that unique voice was in part the result of you coming from a completely different background from most film composers at the time. What do you think?

Elfman: I don't think so. I mean, it's hard to say. So many composers did study and have a really unique voice. I love Alexandre Desplat,¹³⁰ and he studied. He went to music school. He has a very unique voice. Thomas Newman,¹³¹ one of my favorites, he studied. He always has had an incredibly unique voice, so I don't think—no, I would disagree with that. I think simply as an artist, you could say the same for composers. I mean, I listen to a lot of classical music and so much of it sounds like, "Yeah, it's good, but it's just—[sings] "Yeh-deh-deh-deh-deh-deh-deh-de"—



—and then boom! Wow! Who's this guy?" Shostakovich. Wow, did he have a voice. Prokofiev. Holy shit, this guy could really—it's like then suddenly, no matter what I heard, that's Prokofiev, that's Prokofiev. So it's a personal thing. It's an artist thing, if one can find a voice. If you study, that voice will come out. If you didn't study, and you're lucky, like I have [been], to find another way to do it, that voice will eventually work its way to the surface, but I think it's something that's wired deep in our subconscious. I don't think it's learned or unlearned.

Being Hired for *Chicago*

Burlingame: I have to ask you about contributing to the Best Picture of 2002, *Chicago*.¹³²

¹³⁰ Alexandre Desplat (b. 1961) is an award-winning French film composer and conductor. His notable film scores include *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014; *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014. DVD.), *The Shape of Water* (del Toro, 2017; *The Shape of Water*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.), and *The King's Speech* (Hooper, 2010; *The King's Speech*. The Weinstein Company and Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011. DVD.).

¹³¹ Thomas Newman (b. 1955) is an American composer best known for his acclaimed film scoring career. Newman's more than one hundred scoring credits include *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994; *The Shawshank Redemption/The Green Mile*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2017. DVD.), *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999; *American Beauty*. Paramount Entertainment, 2017. DVD.), *Finding Nemo* (Stanton and Unkrich, 2003; *Finding Nemo*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.), and *Wall-E* (Stanton, 2008; *Wall-E*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.).

¹³² *Chicago*. Directed by Rob Marshall, 2002; *Chicago*. Miramax Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

Elfman: Yeah.

Burlingame: What did you do for *Chicago*?

Elfman: You know, *Chicago* was really just Harvey [Weinstein]¹³³ calling me up and he said, “Danny, got to help us out with this one. We need some music and it’s the ‘30s and I hear you’re really into that stuff.” And I said, “Yeah, you’re right. I am.”

Burlingame: Meaning Harvey Weinstein?

Elfman: Yeah. It was real simple. There really wasn’t much score. I mean, I knew that all the songs were written. They just needed interstitial music, and Harvey had heard that I used to be in a 1930s band and knew that oldie stuff. So, it was, “Yeah, you know, Danny, you got to do this.” And I said, “Okay, Harvey, just don’t get mad at me. Sure, I’ll do it.” And that was that. It was fun.

Composing for Superhero Films: *Spider-Man*

Burlingame: Your two biggest box office hits are the first two *Spider-Man*¹³⁴ movies, both again for Sam Raimi. Yet by 2002, you had done lots of superhero stuff, counting *Batman* and *The Hulk*. You’ve done the theme for *The Flash*.¹³⁵ I’m sure I’m missing one or two along the way. When you came to do *Spider-Man*, was it a challenge to find a new way to score a hot comic book hero?

Elfman: No, no, I mean, *Spider-Man*, I knew that the approach was going to be traditional, orchestrally speaking, because of Sam’s instincts. You were asking me about getting into a director’s head at one point, and a big part...I never really talked about that. Did we?

Burlingame: We should.

Elfman: Understanding where a director’s psyche or mind is, that’s half the job, sometimes more than half the job. Sam is a pretty straight-ahead guy, and I think he generally likes his music to be fairly traditional. So, I knew that [*Spider-Man*] was going to be an orchestral score, that I’d use some electronics and percussion stuff. I didn’t really think about that stuff at all. It’s just, ‘jump in and have fun with it’ and try to make it work for the director and/or the tone of

¹³³ Harvey Weinstein (b. 1952) is an American former film producer and co-founder of the entertainment companies Miramax and The Weinstein Company. His producing credits include *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994; *Pulp Fiction*. Miramax Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.), *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden, 1998; Miramax Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001; *The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2012. Blu-ray.).

¹³⁴ *Spider-Man*. Directed by Sam Raimi, 2002; *Spider-Man: Trilogy Collection*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2017. DVD.

¹³⁵ *The Flash* is an action superhero television series that aired from 1990 to 1991 on CBS. It features John Wesley Shipp as the Barry Allen/Flash, a DC Comics superhero with super speed. The show features a theme song by Danny Elfman and an original score by Shirley Walker. (Bilson and De Meo, 1990–1991; *The Flash: The Complete Series*. Warner Home Video, 2006. DVD.)

whatever it is. If I were doing it again now, it would be totally different. It'd be darker, a different type of propulsion. But still, you don't think about what you used to do; you just think, "This is the challenge right here. It's in front of me right now." Unless somebody is saying, "I want you to do that thing you did for so-and-so just like that," then you go, "Hmmm, all right, now we may have a problem because I don't really want to do that again." But that's usually not the case, fortunately.

Burlingame: And in the case of *Spider-Man* as opposed to *Batman*, it's bright and colorful, and you're in the sunlight and—

Elfman: Yeah, yeah, exactly. He wanted this soulful secondary theme that played off of his torment, not knowing his angst. We played around with some different stuff because I had the main theme for a long time—but what is that other part of it? And I realized oh, I had written this piece for Uncle Ben, dying Uncle Ben. I said, "That's it right there," and that became the B-side of the *Spider-Man* theme. I realized that the Uncle Ben theme really is the other side of the character.

Burlingame: Did you read comic books as a kid?

Elfman: I did.

Burlingame: Was that any help?

Elfman: No, no help at all. I read *Fantastic Four*,¹³⁶ [*The Amazing*] *Spider-Man*¹³⁷—God, I don't even remember. I know that coming back from middle school in particular, coming back from Audubon Junior High¹³⁸ in Los Angeles, the bus would drop us off. There was a comic book stand that I'd always check and see what was on the stand there, but it was a short period. By the time I got to high school, [it was] long over, so it's not like something that stuck with me into adult years. When I came on to *Batman*, Tim sent me some copies of the newer generation at that point called *The Dark Knight*.¹³⁹ I loved them, they were really good. Now it's gone from comic books to graphic novels. Those are what started making me an actual fan of graphic novels, of which I have quite a collection. [They're] different, weird. Graphic novels are something I really love, but growing up on the comic books has nothing to do with doing a movie, any more than growing up on *Batman* the TV series¹⁴⁰ had no influence when I sat down to write the title for

¹³⁶ *Fantastic Four* is a comic book series created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Marvel Comics. First published in 1961, the series follows the Fantastic Four, a superhero group comprising Mister Fantastic, the Invisible Woman, the Human Torch, and the Thing. The team has since been adapted to film, television, and video games.

¹³⁷ *The Amazing Spider-Man* is a comic book series created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko for Marvel Comics. It was first published in 1963 and follows the superhero Spider-Man as he fights crime in New York City. The character has since been the subject for film, television, and video game adaptations such as the early 2000s Spider-Man film series (2002, see footnote 134) directed by Sam Raimi (see footnote 102).

¹³⁸ Audubon Middle School is located in the Baldwin Hills area of Los Angeles, California.

¹³⁹ *Batman: The Dark Knight* is an American comic book series featuring the DC Comics superhero Batman. Created by David Finch, *The Dark Knight* comprised thirty-seven issues published between 2011 and 2014 before it was renewed in 2020–2021 as a six-issue miniseries.

¹⁴⁰ *Batman* is an action superhero television show that aired on ABC from 1966 to 1968. Based on the eponymous DC Comics character, *Batman* follows Adam West as Bruce Wayne/Batman and Burt Ward as Dick Grayson/Robin

Batman the movie, or *Spider-Man* versus the Spidey theme, or any of these things. You sit down and you look at the movie, and you go, “Here it is, right now. Nothing that was done before this actually makes any difference.”

Scoring for Documentaries, *Standard Operating Procedure*, *The Unknown Known*

Burlingame: One of the interesting things you’ve been doing in recent years is scores for documentaries. I’m thinking about the Errol Morris¹⁴¹ movies.

Elfman: Yeah.

Burlingame: *Standard Operating Procedure*¹⁴² and *The Unknown Known*.¹⁴³ Have these required a different mindset?

Elfman: Yeah, it’s a very different mindset. It’s the mindset I love getting into when I’m writing not for film. Starting about eleven years ago, I did this commission, “Serenada Schizophrana”¹⁴⁴ for [the] American Composers Orchestra. It was played at Carnegie Hall, and it was the first time I got to really cut loose and write away from picture. Oh my God, what a relief it was. I saw a documentary once about a guy with Tourette’s and he talked about how he was able to contain these outbursts, and then would come home and lock himself in his library and then just scream obscenities for about an hour. He was completely exhausted. It was like all that pent up repressed energy wanting to burst out. It was a difficult life. When I was writing “Serenada,” I kind of felt the same way that I’d been so many times—I’ve written something for film, and I wished I could keep going. I’m just getting into it, but the scene ended. It’s like, “That’s it.” You get three minutes and forty seconds and it’s over, so to be able to write without picture was such a relief. I decided I would try to do it every year, but of course that’s proved difficult. I wrote a ballet for Twyla Tharp.¹⁴⁵

Non-film Commissions, *Rabbit and Rogue*, *Iris*

as they fight crime in the fictional Gotham City. (Dozier, 1966–1968; *Batman: The Complete Television Series*. Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2014. DVD.)

¹⁴¹ Errol Morris (b. 1948) is an American director and documentarian. He is best known for his influential 1988 documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris, 1988; *The Thin Blue Line*. Criterion Collection, 2015. DVD.) as well as the Oscar-winning *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Morris, 2003; *The Fog of War*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004. DVD.) and *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008, see footnote 142).

¹⁴² *Standard Operating Procedure*. Directed by Errol Morris, 2008; *Standard Operating Procedure*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

¹⁴³ *The Unknown Known*. Directed by Errol Morris, 2014; *The Unknown Known*. Anchor Bay, 2014. DVD.

¹⁴⁴ *Serenada Schizophrana* is a six-movement symphonic suite composed by Danny Elfman. It was written in 2004 and premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2005. Two of its movements (“I. Pianos” and “II. Blue Strings”) were featured in the soundtrack to the 2008 documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008, see footnote 142) alongside an original score by Elfman.

¹⁴⁵ Twyla Tharp (b. 1941) is an award-winning American choreographer, dancer, author, and creator of the Twyla Tharp Dance company, which merged with the American Ballet Theatre in 1988. A prolific choreographer, Tharp’s works include over one hundred and twenty dances, six films, four Broadway shows, and four ballets.

Burlingame: Which is called *Rabbit and Rogue*.¹⁴⁶

Elfman: *Rabbit and Rogue*, which I just recorded in Berlin last month and I'll be releasing. I did this piece for Cirque du Soleil¹⁴⁷ a couple years ago. That was great fun. But—

Burlingame: *Iris*?¹⁴⁸

Elfman: Yeah, *Iris*. They call it *Eee-ris*. But of course, it's called *Iris* if you live here. The two exceptions were writing for Errol [Morris] because technically I was scoring a movie, but for me I was just writing because Errol didn't want me looking at picture and writing. He wanted me just to watch it and then just go write. Very different mindset. It kind of tapped more into that frame of mind I get into when I'm writing a concerto or writing a symphonic piece, which I desperately need to do to keep myself sane. I'm starting at least one commission, if not two, this next year as well, and I'm looking forward to it. Ideally, every year would be divided between doing film music and doing some non-film music to keep me sane, but in my schedule, it doesn't always allow that.

Burlingame: Is it fair to say that those documentary scores have kind of a minimalist vibe to them? I mean, when I was listening, I think initially *Standard Operating Procedure*, I thought, "Well, it's a little bit more minimalist than we usually get from Danny." Is that fair or unfair?

Elfman: Well, no, I mean, [that's] fair—it's both, because parts of it [are] definitely more minimalist, but not then certain films, you know, which are equally as minimal. There are moments in Errol's scores where—the one thing I can do, which I don't normally get to do, is just dissonance, to take the chords out, to push them into places that nine out of ten directors would go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, stop there. What was that?" And I go, "Well, it was a harmonic rub, but I'll take it out," and I do. Here was a situation I didn't have to take it out. The best way I could describe it is this: There's a certain point when I'm writing anything, where it's all uphill. It's like pushing and pushing and pushing to get this tone and composition moving and rolling and trying to get momentum behind it. Then, somewhere halfway into, let's say a film score, I feel like, "Okay, I'm on it now, I got it. I know where it's going. I've got the puzzle and logistics worked out." Somewhere towards the end, I feel like I'm now writing downhill, and especially when a composition is allowed to go longer, where I'm following it now. I'm not even leading anymore. I'm just letting it take me where it wants to go, and I love that feeling.

¹⁴⁶ *Rabbit and Rogue* is a ballet written by Danny Elfman for choreographer Twyla Tharp (see footnote 145) and the American Ballet Theatre. The five-act ballet premiered in 2008 and follows two mischievous men as experience encounters with two couples of opposite personalities.

¹⁴⁷ Cirque du Soleil is a Canadian entertainment company and theatrical producer. It is best known for its contemporary circus productions which feature character-driven stories, elaborate sets and costumes, and high-flying and challenging acrobatics. Cirque du Soleil's productions include *Ka*, *Alegría*, *La Nouba*, and *O* as well as the 2012 film *Cirque du Soleil: Worlds Away* (Adamson, 2012; *Cirque du Soleil: Worlds Away*. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.).

¹⁴⁸ *Iris* was a show by Canadian entertainment company Cirque du Soleil (see footnote 147). Residing in the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, California from 2011–2013, the show explored the history of cinema and featured choreography, acrobatics, and other circus acts along with an original score by Danny Elfman.

And when I wrote “Serenada Schizophrana” and the *Rabbit in Rogue*, I had that great exhilaration of “I’m not controlling this composition.” I just started it. It’s like pushing a train up the hill and then you get to the top and then just get on it, and just see where the hell it goes. It’s a great feeling. With Errol’s movies, he allows me that luxury of just, “Take it out, let it go, maybe we’ll use it, maybe we won’t.” That’s great [because] I’m just writing music, and if he finds a place for it, great, and if he doesn’t, he doesn’t. But I love Errol, you know. His mind is really intense and incredibly smart, but he gives me free rein to just go in the same way that Twyla did, the same way that I did for *Iris*, and the same way for “Serenada Schizophrana.” It was like, “Just go, don’t think about it.” Other than you have a time limit, forty-five minutes, you know, for a concerto or whatever.

Collaborating with David O. Russell, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *American Hustle*

Burlingame: You’ve contributed to a couple of David O. Russell¹⁴⁹ films.

Elfman: Yeah.

Burlingame: *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle*.¹⁵⁰ How different were those experiences? What did he need from you musically since those two movies have a lot of outside songs in them?

Elfman: Well, you know, working on a David O. Russell film is completely, completely different than working for any other director. All directors are really different. Working for Tim is nothing like working for Sam or Gus Van Sant or David O. Russell. He [has] his own process. With David, you have to learn very quickly to be really flexible and to roll, because he’s going to change his mind six, seven, eight times. When you start going, you’re going to think you’ve got momentum, and then it’s going to stop. He’s going to [say], “Dude, we’re doing it this way. Boom, now let’s go,” and he likes that. He does that with his actors, and he certainly does that with his composers. I’ve never seen him acting on set, but I’ve heard that he doesn’t let them [the actors] get comfortable. As soon as they’re doing lines a certain way, he’ll say something to them and purposefully throw them in another direction. He likes to see what will happen, so it’s really unpredictable. I think under the wrong circumstances, it can be mind-bogglingly frustrating, but if you’re able to stay really fluid and flexible, it’s really interesting. It’s an interesting journey, and I love David.

Burlingame: Does that mean that you’ve written music, and then you have to write more music?

Elfman: Oh, yeah, yeah. They’re short scores—I mean each one is probably like twenty minutes of music, sixteen to eighteen minutes of music—but I probably wrote sixty for each of them. When you do a David movie, you [think], “That’s just the way it’s going to be. There’s going to be a lot of unused music,” but that’s cool, you know. In the end, I like *Silver Lining Playbook*. It

¹⁴⁹ David O. Russell (b. 1958) is an American director, screenwriter, and producer. His film credits include *Three Kings* (Russell, 1999; *Three Kings*. Warner Home Video, 2000. DVD.), *American Hustle* (2013, see footnote 150), and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012, see footnote 95).

¹⁵⁰ *American Hustle*. Directed by David O. Russell, 2013; *American Hustle*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2014. DVD.

was a crazy experience, and if the director had been another director putting me through the same thing, I might have [decided], “I don’t ever want to work with this guy.” But there was something about the fact that it was David, and I loved the way the movie came out. I know this feeling so well of ‘I wanted to kill the director’ many times during the creation of the score. Then after it’s done, watching the movie [and deciding], “Yeah, I’ll work with him again.” It’s very close to childbirth—not something you and I personally can relate to, but what I can say is that very few women in the middle of childbirth are thinking about their next child. They’re going, “I never want to do this again,” but when you’re looking at the baby later, it doesn’t take that much time before it’s, “Well, maybe one more.” What happens is the end product makes you forget the pain.

I think of scoring frequently that way. I would say in half the movies I’ve worked on, there has been a point in the middle of the score [when I would feel], “I never want to do this again. I never want to work with this person again.” There’s too much aggravation, life’s too short, it’s too much work, I’m killing myself. I’m shortening my own life to do this. Do I really want to do that? Why don’t I just enjoy life? Why don’t I live? Why don’t I take more vacations? I get into a mindset of, “What the fuck am I doing working this hard?” Then I’m [finished] and the movie is playing. I’m listening to this score and I’m going, “Hey, it really wasn’t so bad actually. Yeah, it was a bit rough here and there, but you know—oh yeah, I’d work with him in a second if he called again.” So, I think it was a similar psychology to the birthing. If the baby is cute and pretty, making the right kind of sounds, suddenly the pain just doesn’t seem quite so intense anymore.

Re-Composing Classical Material: *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Oz the Great and Powerful*, *Mission Impossible*

Burlingame: You have also written—you’ve taken on fresh takes on classic material. I’m thinking about movies like *Alice in Wonderland*¹⁵¹ and *Oz the Great and Powerful*.¹⁵² I’m wondering, how hard is it to take a classic piece of American culture and put a fresh spin on it?

Elfman: Well, I mean, *Alice in Wonderland* was effortless because I didn’t really have anything to go on. There was nothing to think about or avoid because there was nothing in my mind already musically for *Alice* at all. *Oz* was a different story because *The Wizard of Oz* was something I know really, really well, so I had to very consciously go, “Okay, not going there, except one moment where the Munchkins start to sing. There’ll be like, an almost song, but it gets cut short.” So except for that thirty seconds, which [I] was very consciously allowing myself just into that world, I had to do it in a way that was obviously not plagiarizing a song. But there was no way to sing a group Munchkin song [laughs] without touching on that world at least conceptually. Just the very sound of singing Munchkins—there’s no way around it. *Oz* was a trickier bit because there was something to avoid going into, but I was used to that. *Mission: Impossible*,¹⁵³ *Batman*, all these things had an area to avoid, so it wasn’t that big a deal other

¹⁵¹ *Alice in Wonderland*. Directed by Tim Burton, 2010; *Alice in Wonderland*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD

¹⁵² *Oz the Great and Powerful*. Directed by Sam Raimi, 2013; *Oz the Great and Powerful*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2018. DVD.

¹⁵³ *Mission: Impossible*. Directed by Brian De Palma, 1996; *Mission: Impossible: The Five-Movie DVD Collection*. Paramount Entertainment, 2018. DVD.

than I had to be very conscious. And in this particular case, because of legal reasons, I had to be very, very conscious of never crossing the line musically into anything that had been done in the original *Wizard of Oz*.¹⁵⁴

Elfman's Proudest Achievement

Burlingame: What do you think is your proudest achievement?

Elfman: My proudest achievement? Jeez, I don't have a proudest achievement that I [can] think of. I mean, when I started out, I only had one goal, which was to be eclectic like my master, Herrmann, was. You know, Herrmann could do *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*,¹⁵⁵ and he could do *North by Northwest*. He could do all these different [scores]. He could move to *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* and effortlessly between these genres. I remember thinking, "I could never be Herrmann, I could never be that great." I tried to learn early on, when [I was] writing an orchestral work—I will never be Prokofiev. I will never be Shostakovich. I'll never be Stravinsky. I'll never be great, but I could at least look to them as a model of greatness.

For my film work, to be eclectic was my goal. So, if I had any achievement, it would be twofold: one, that I did in fact have the ability to move between different genres; and two, that I survived. Survival in my business is a tremendously difficult thing. It's an incredibly competitive industry. I don't know if there's any part of film making where it's such a small group of people doing so much of the work, and it's very cutthroat. To have made it through so many difficult periods, I think that would be my greatest achievement: simply surviving with the skill sets I had, which was none, and the talent I had, which was minimal. Clearly, there was something there to grab hold of. I think I was able to make it all work for me and still manage to keep myself afloat in this kind of dog-eat-dog world of warlords, trying to conquer territory and take from other warlords, which is kind of what our world is.

Advice to Aspiring Film Composers

Burlingame: What advice would you give to an aspiring film composer?

Elfman: You know, that's really hard because I do speak with aspiring film composers frequently. I don't know which is the better advice because, on the one hand, I would say follow your own instincts and develop your own voice. On the other hand, that may keep them from having a career. Just because I lucked out doesn't mean that they will, so I'm of two completely different minds. One is, learn to adapt and learn to mold yourself into different forms, because to be a successful film composer, you constantly have to reinvent yourself, and you have to adapt to very, very difficult psyches in directors. Their minds are not often simple, tranquil places in which to reside. They're unpredictable, they're extreme, so you have to really—it's like setting out to sea knowing that there are lots of storms out there, and you're at the time of year where

¹⁵⁴ *The Wizard of Oz*. Directed by Victor Fleming and King Vidor, 1939; *The Wizard of Oz*. Warner Home Video, 2014. DVD.

¹⁵⁵ *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1947; *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013. DVD.

typhoons can come from anywhere. You really have to learn to be adaptable, so adaptability is incredibly important.

On the other hand, if you don't develop your own voice, you won't succeed either, but at what point do you dig in and do your thing against the trend of what might be popular at a particular moment? There's no clear way to advise that. I don't [advise that], other than to say, do not do what I have done because that's the worst advice. I tell people to study. I tell people to go to music school. Don't use me as an example, because I think that's the worst thing anybody [could] do, coming up, is to go, "Well, Danny Elfman didn't go to music school and he didn't study music theory, so why should I?" My answer is always, "Because you should." And then further, I would say, "Because if I [could] go back, I would." I missed not going to school. I'm sad that I never got to go to college. I listen to all my friends talk about their college years and going away and how much they got out of it. I don't have any of those experiences. I never lived in a dorm. I've never been away. I don't even—barely—remember high school. My education more or less stops with middle school.

Burlingame: Well, you didn't miss much in terms of dorm life. [Laughs]

Elfman: Well, maybe not. But the interaction, being inspired by teachers and other students who are interested—I don't even know what it's like to be around other students interested in the same thing you are.

Career If He Weren't A Film Composer

Burlingame: What would you be if you weren't a film composer?

Elfman: Well, I couldn't have maintained and stayed in a rock band. I mean, my ears got destroyed virtually by the time I left that. Whether I wanted to or not, my time of being in a band on stage was finished when I stopped. I have damage from the seventeen years I spent on that stage, and I have genetic problems also exacerbating it, so that couldn't have continued no matter what I wanted to do. I don't know what I could've become. I think a career criminal?

Burlingame: [Laughs]

Elfman: —a chef. Would've been too old to be an astronaut. You know, I frequently toy with that idea. What would've become of me if I had been a guy in a band who could no longer go on stage and put themselves in front of that level of decibels? If a doctor says, "You can't do this anymore or you will be deaf in these few years," [I'd] say, "All right, I can't do that anymore, what do I do?" I think career criminal was probably the best alternative because I'd already worked in restaurants for years. You know, all those years in the Mystic Knights, I worked restaurants around our street performances, and that didn't work for me. I have to do something where I'm not on my feet all day because my feet are just not good at standing. So—criminal? I never would've made it in business. I have no other abilities. I'd make a horrible producer. As an executive, I wouldn't have lasted six months anywhere. I would've gotten myself fired so fast. So, what else is there? I mean, I don't know.

Musicals for Broadway

Burlingame: Okay. So you've also now worked in ballet and in pure concert music. Has there been any thought of doing a musical for Broadway?

Elfman: Yeah, I've toyed with that on and off. I even started on one and didn't finish it. I am constantly intrigued by it, but it's like my problem with *Nightmare Before Christmas*, the reason why *Nightmare Before Christmas* was trashed. The music was trashed really badly by critics when it came out because they were of the Broadway [mindset]. If you love Broadway, you can't love the music to *Nightmare* because it's anti-Broadway. I'm intrigued by it [Broadway], but I hate Broadway music. I love *Sweeney Todd*,¹⁵⁶ *West Side Story*,¹⁵⁷ I mean obviously this classic stuff that I think is fantastic, but contemporary musicals—there're very few that I don't look at with a lot of disdain because it's pop music. I have a real problem with pop music. I've never liked pop music. When I was in a band, I didn't like pop music. It seems like Broadway, somewhere from the 1970s on, moved in the direction of adult contemporary popular music. It's like a vampire staying away from sunlight. I can't get near that and not get burned hideously.

I would love to do something, but I don't think it could be for Broadway. I think it would have to be for Off-Broadway. To me, a lot of the more interesting stuff on Broadway started Off-Broadway, because if you aim for Broadway, you're aiming for Top 40. The problem is, if you're a songwriter and you're trying to write a Top 40 song, you're just going to write a Top 40 song. And if you don't like Top 40 music, you've got to find a way to write alternatively. Something may end up becoming a hit song from that, but it's going to be more off center. So, I would love the idea of doing Broadway that's off the mark, to the right or to the left. I don't know exactly how, but if there's a way to approach it, again it comes down to *Sweeney Todd*. You know, this is something where Tim and I really share a mutual fascination. I think that's just an insanely amazing musical to me, but there's nothing about it that's like Broadway musical in the sense that we think of a Broadway musical.

How Elfman Would Like To Be Remembered

Burlingame: How would you like to be remembered?

Elfman: Oh—the guy who wrote *The Simpsons* theme and then took a big, long vacation for the rest of his career. Lived in the Caribbean off of royalties from *The Simpsons* and never wrote

¹⁵⁶ *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is a musical with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by Hugh Wheeler. It is based on the 1973 play of the same name by Christopher Bond and follows the story of the eponymous barber and serial killer. The original production of *Sweeney Todd* premiered in 1979 and was directed by Hal Prince. Songs from the musical include “Johanna,” “Pretty Women,” “A Little Priest,” and “Not While I’m Around.” (DVD Production of the stage musical: *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (Broadway Version)*. Warner Home Video, 2008. DVD.)

¹⁵⁷ *West Side Story* is a musical based on William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* with a book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Following two young lovers of rival New York City street gangs, the original Broadway production premiered in 1957 and was directed by Jerome Robbins. Songs from the musical include “Maria,” “I Feel Pretty,” and “Somewhere.” *West Side Story* was adapted into a film in 1961 directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise (*West Side Story: 50th Anniversary Edition*. MGM Video & DVD, 2012. DVD.).

another thing in his life ‘cause he didn’t have to and was one lazy bastard. That’s how I hope people remember me in the future. He got one lucky gig, and he never had to work again. And so he didn’t.

END CREDITS

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