

ustom scoring requires a high level of skill, experience and collaboration. Whether it's for a TV series, film, commercial or video game, the bar has been set extremely high by many great composers working today.

### THE FAMILY GUY

Creating the original score for the hit show *Family Guy* is serious fun for composer Ron Jones of LA's Ron Jones Productions ([www.ronjonesproductions.com](http://www.ronjonesproductions.com)). The show's creator, Seth MacFarlane, incorporates music into the show's comedic storyline with song parodies and signature flashbacks. Music plays an important role by playing it straight to the outrageous comedy on screen.

"We have to let the joke be the joke," says Jones. "The music is not the joke. In fact, we would lessen the joke if we winked at the audience musically, like we are patronizing them. In a show like *Family Guy*, it's always funny and there's always something sardonic going on. When you cut to Quahog, I always play it musically as though you wake up in the morning and it's a beautiful day, even though you know there is going to be this unbelievable chaos to follow. Otherwise, it wouldn't be funny if you sense the Griffin family is screwed up right from the start. It's only funny if we believe this could be a normal day and then the family has all of a sudden gone awry."

Creating the juxtaposition of the score starts early. "I am given a script very early on," reports Jones. "If I see something that is musically implied, or if a pre-score is needed, I'll make a note and score that with MIDI gear. For example, if there is a song in animation, they have to sing it and do the voices first, and then they animate that. You have to put the cart before the horse."

Once the show is nearing completion, a rough-cut is sent to Jones and a spotting session takes place where he discusses the score with MacFarlane. "The score, in my philosophy, has to come out of the show," he explains. "It has to come out of the characters, it's not something that I apply to the show, it is something that grows organically out of the show."

From the beginning of his writing process, Jones is conscious of the end result. "When I look at the cue or the scene that I am scoring, I pick the various points that I want to hit or emphasize or don't want to emphasize. I always make note of where the dialogue is because I don't want to have the mixer raise and lower the music during the final mix of the show. My goal is to take masking tape and tape down the music tracks on the console. Put it at zero and let the music just rise and fall because I was trained to do the score and the dynamics, too."



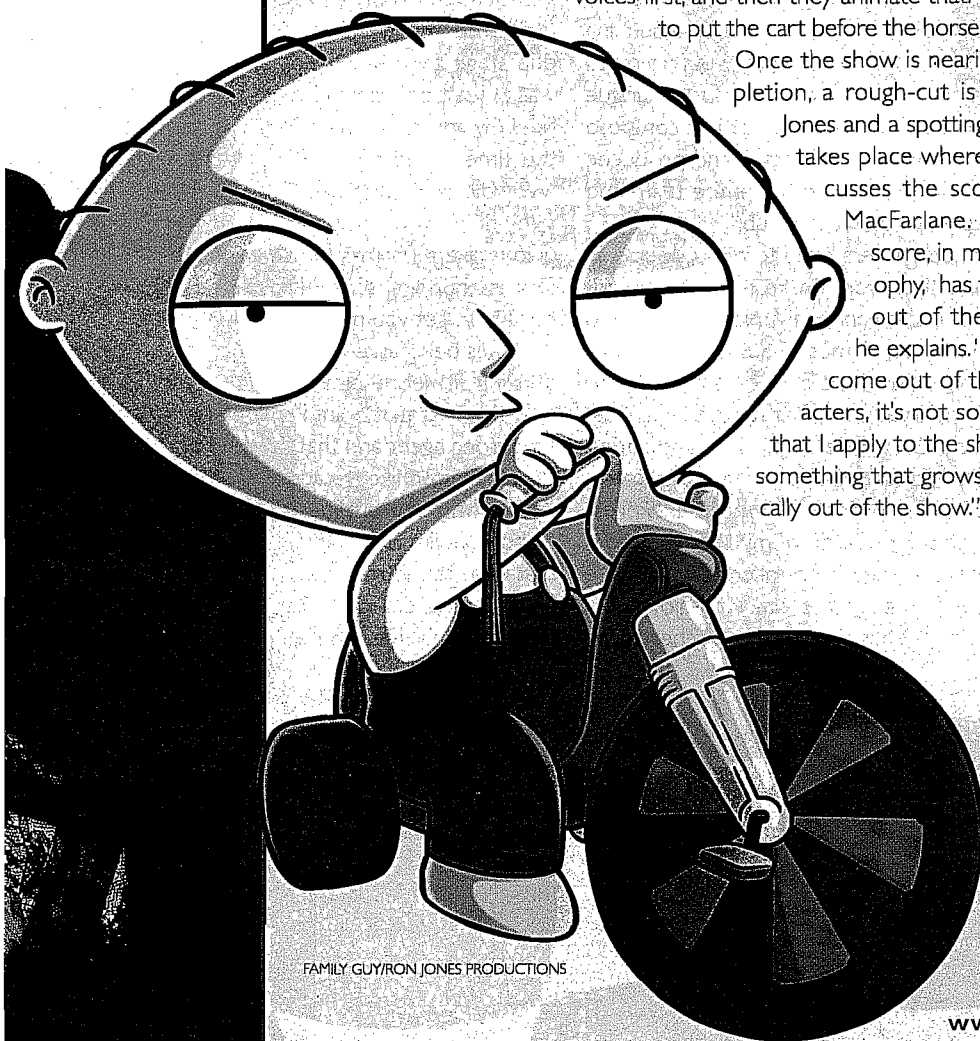
Ron Jones, who provides original music for *Family Guy*, says the key to the formula working is, "We have to let the joke be the joke. The music is not the joke."

*Family Guy* uses two composers, Jones and Walter Murphy, who work independently, scoring separate episodes. "I do not consult with Murphy. We are friends, but we never talk about the show," he says. "We don't collaborate at all." Each episode is cast to showcase either Jones or Murphy's talents. "Seth noticed that Walter would do well on some things and I would do well with others. So, he started casting the show's score like they would for an actor. They see different potential with each one of us."

MacFarlane's impressive musical knowledge and natural singing ability plays an important role when creating each episode. "He comes in and just blows our mind with his knowledge of music," reports Jones. "He realizes that music is the intellectual content of shows. The writers get together in a room and come up with the wackiest ideas and think that Walter or I can just pull it out of a hat. Now, bear in mind that we sometimes have only six days to do an episode. And it may involve 20 or 30 different styles in a show. It goes off in all those little side worlds where one minute they are talking about carpet and then they are talking about elves that are in the carpet. Talk about whip-lash!"

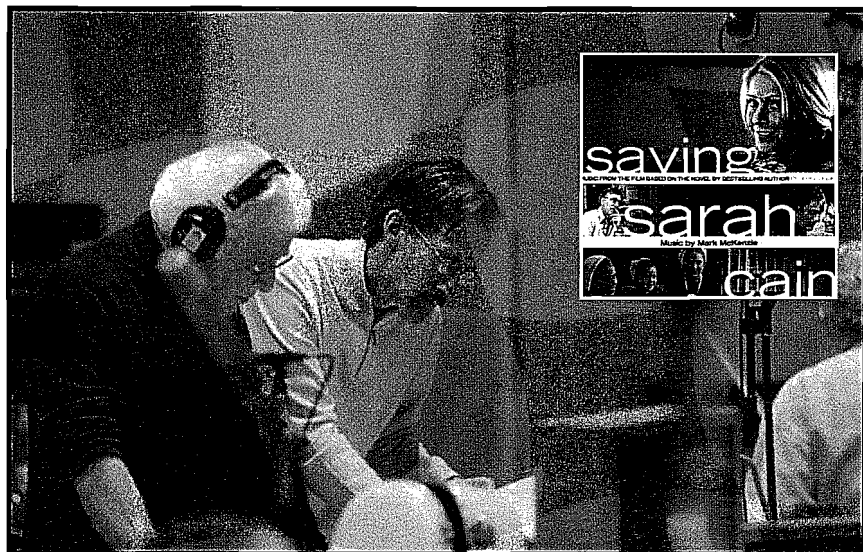
And if turning on a musical dime wasn't demanding enough, the music is recorded in just one three-hour session and mixed live at the recording session. "I have 40 or 50 pieces of music of various lengths and I have to record it in a three-hour union date of three 50-minute slots," explains Jones. "That means we only have time to read it down once and then record it." During that same three-hour session, the score is mixed in stereo and surround in realtime, as the musicians are performing it, by scoring mixer Armin Steiner.

Jones feels that the behind-the-scenes world of scoring is something everyone should see. "The dreamers are the writers and we try to be fulfillers of those dreams," he says. "And, there are 100 people, or more, under me that have to fulfill that score. It's not an easy thing."



FAMILY GUY/RON JONES PRODUCTIONS

# Custom Scores



Mark McKenzie (right, with Jerry Goldsmith) composed romantic themes for *Saving Sarah Cain*.

I am the writer and I have 30 copyists, 50 people in the orchestra, eight assistants, music editors, the recording engineer and the staff there; it's a big operation."

Before the orchestra is recorded, Jones will do a virtual, or MIDI, version of the score for approval by the producers. The score is written using Digital Performer with MOTU 828mk3 and Traveler audio interfaces. Apple Final Cut Pro is used to make a QuickTime of the video and for viewing.

"All the parts are written on paper, then inputted into Digital Performer by the eight assistants," explains Jones. "We have templates on Performer so we have all the same things. Then, everything goes to my iDisk for that show, since I may be working on more than one show at a time. Then one of my assistants can layback a rough mix to picture using FCP for playback for the producers."

He says, "If people laugh at the show, then I feel fulfilled because I was the musical straight-man."

## FILMS

Mark McKenzie ([www.markmckenzie.org](http://www.markmckenzie.org)) has made a name for himself orchestrating films such as *Men in Black*, *Robots* and *Spider-Man*. Collaborating with Danny Elfman, John Barry and Jerry Goldsmith has enabled him to perfect his skills as a composer: McKenzie has gone on to compose exceptionally beautiful thematic music for films such as *Saving Sarah Cain* and *Blizzard*.

McKenzie explains his approach to film scoring: "When I'm working with a director who brings me onto a movie early, I read the script carefully and begin to assess out how to address the story creatively through some special instrumentation, style or compositional approach. Once the rough-cut or finished film arrives, I begin to work on themes since I believe that strong themes create great value in a movie emotionally. I don't try to write to a script because the film always changes character from what I think it

will be by just looking at the script. I labor over those themes sometimes for a couple weeks, as time permits, somewhat like Beethoven sketched his music; carefully changing notes, adding, subtracting, altering the theme until it captures the feel for a film as best I can imagine."

In addition to working to bring the director's vision to life, he always tries to get in touch with the sound effects team and the dubbers (mixers) to find out as much information about what they're doing so he can complement their creative efforts. "I pay close attention to the dialogue and effects so that later, when we end up in the dubbing room, the dubber isn't going nuts trying to raise and lower my music to duck dialogue and effects. The goal is to not just compose great music for the director and producer, but to work well with the entire team and end up with a great final dub."

Film composers need to be as diverse as the films they work on. From the action adventure of *Dragonheart: A New Beginning* to the romantic themes of *Saving Sarah Cain*, McKenzie must have a vast creative well to pull from. "I've found that my getting a masters and doctorate in music composition from USC was just a tiny beginning to discovering the potential in musical expression," he shares. "One of my life's great joys is learning, and each film offers a way to use new ideas in a creative way. I've enjoyed the learning that has occurred by orchestrating

about 100 films for composers Danny Elfman, Jerry Goldsmith, Alan Silvestri, Marc Shaiman, John Barry, Bruce Broughton and others. Diversity is something I thrive on and it keeps me expanding."

An original score is often used to show the emotional side of the story. Therefore a composer must be willing to put his or her identity aside to service the film. "I orchestrated the legendary Jerry Goldsmith's last seven films and in [the] process found him to be an amazing mentor," reports McKenzie. "I do believe a composer's voice can most often be heard to greater or lesser degrees no matter what is composed because every note we compose is processed through our individual values, preferences, experiences, education, imagination and ability. Two of my favorite composer friends, Danny Elfman and the late Jerry Goldsmith, have modeled again and again confidence and courage on scores I've orchestrated for them. Jerry did so most valiantly on *Timeline*, when he fought to preserve the Renaissance feel to his score and the use of the Sackbut, a renaissance brass instrument."

Creating a score that tells the story can be met with obstacles along the way. "I composed a score to a film called *The Lost Child*, which is one the more gentle and beautiful stories I've seen, and one of the more gentle and beautiful scores I've composed," says McKenzie. "Even though everyone on the dub stage said they liked the score, there was at least one executive who strongly disliked my approach. The next day my agent at the time called me up agitated and said, 'Why did you compose a score like that????! Why didn't you compose something more unique, like a Thomas Newman- or Mychael Danna-sounding score? If you'd do that, I'd be able to get you much more work.'

"I was being asked to be more original by copying someone else's sound," he continues. "It was at that point I realized I was with the wrong agent and that my road might be slower than I'd like because beauty, emotion and warmth are qualities that I'm attracted to both in film and in music. Incidentally, the *Lost Child* soundtrack quickly sold out and is an expensive collector's item now. If we are true to our selves, sometimes it turns out



Beta Petrol ([www.betapetrol.net](http://www.betapetrol.net)) handled music supervision, licensing, negotiations and production on a Sears commercial campaign, out of Y&R Chicago, featuring *High School Musical's* Vanessa Hudgens. *(Don't Just Go Back) Arrive!* is also a full-length music video, with original music written by producer Neo Da Matrix and directed by Joseph Kahn of HSI Productions. Beta Petrol partners Bryan Ray Turcotte and Nathan Ehrenfeld were brought in by the Y&R team at the beginning of the project to act as music creative consultants, and then see it through to completion. They suggested the involvement of Neo Da Matrix, a music producer who has worked with Jay-Z, Rihanna and Beyonce.