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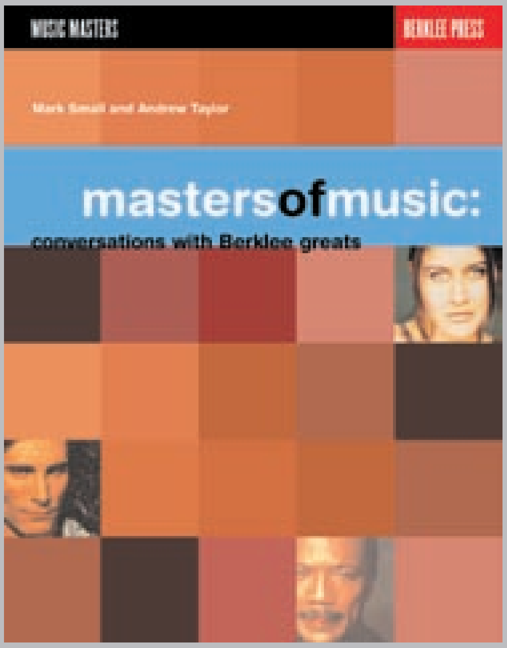
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Alf Clausen

primetime tunes

Composer Alf Clausen '66 is riding high underscoring *The Simpsons.*

WINDING THROUGH COLDWATER CANON IN BEVERLY HILLS with Alf Clausen '66 on the way to a *Simpsons* spotting session, the conversation was wide ranging. By nature, Alf is good humored, erudite, and unpretentious to a point belying his status as one of Hollywood's top TV composers. The traffic lights that day illustrated the subtext of our discussion of his bio: Alf's arrival as composer was also not without inconvenient pauses. He recalled the celebrated series *Moonlighting* ending in 1989 after a four-year run and six Emmy nominations for Alf. He says it's part of the business-riding high one day and then, boom, unemployed for seven months. However, when one door closes, it seems a better one always opens for Alf.

His 18 years of persistent dues-paying while seeking his break as a composer is a lesson in forbearance. When he came to Hollywood in 1967, he freelanced as a teacher, a bassist, music copyist, ghost composer, arranger—whatever put food on the table and held the promise of a toehold in the business. It took nine years before he got his first solid break as an arranger. That ultimately led to his becoming music director and conductor for the *Donny and Marie* variety show. In 1985, when he began writing for *Moonlighting*, he was finally recognized as a composer.

Growing up in Jamestown, North Dakota, Alf studied French horn and piano. He sang in choirs and played in the concert band. After high school, he enrolled at

North Dakota State University as a mechanical-engineering major. Aware that insights to the entertainment industry are rarely uncovered on the Dakota prairie, Alf spent a summer in New York City with his cousin—a professional pianist there. The impact of Broadway shows, concerts in Central Park, and lessons with a professional French hornist convinced Alf to switch his major to music as soon as he got back on campus. Correspondence courses acquainted him with Berklee, and ultimately led to full-time Berklee studies after graduation from the university. He earned his diploma, taught at Berklee for a year, and then headed for Los Angeles.

To date, Alf has been composer and/or orchestrator, and/or conductor for 29 films, 24 TV series, and 24 movies of the week, and arranger/music director for several popular variety shows. He has received a total of seven ASCAP awards for composition, two Emmy Awards, and numerous other recognitions. Currently Alf's music is heard on *The Simpsons* weekly in 70 countries, and six nights each week in the United States. Rhino Records recently released a CD of Alf's *Simpsons* music. All this provides confirmation that Alf's contribution to popular culture is no joke.

Q. When did you know you would become a composer?

It was such a gradual growth that I can't remember one conscious decision to go into that profession. As a student at North Dakota State University, I found it difficult to get answers to questions I had about the entertainment industry. I remember getting a copy of Henry Mancini's *Sounds and Scores*, a popular book in the early '60s about arranging and how it applied to film. I found the book to be a revelation about movie music from the composer/arranger's standpoint. My instructors didn't have a handle on what this was about.

Q. How did you end up coming to Berklee?

While I was earning my B.A. in music theory, I was taking the Berklee correspondence course to learn about jazz and how to write big band music. One of my instructors took a new position at the University of Wisconsin, and suggested I come down there to work on my master's degree. Their French horn instructor was John Barrows who had been a New York studio player who played on the Miles Davis/Gil Evans records and others. I ended up hating it. The attitude there very anti-jazz. The jazz band wasn't even allowed to rehearse on campus. Barrows and I also knocked heads over a bunch of things. I became frustrated. I quit the university and came to Berklee.

Q. What were your impressions when you first arrived?

Coming to the city was pretty intense for me, but having spent a summer in New York, I had gotten my feet wet. At that time, there were a lot of professional musicians who would come off the road for more schooling. The level of the musicianship was amazing. It was so inspiring to be caught up in that intensity. There had never been a French horn player at Berklee, so the minute they found I played it, I was put into every ensemble I could possibly play in to add new colors. Herb Pomeroy put me in his recording band and I am on some *Jazz in the Classroom* records. I played all the time.

Q. Who were some of your favorite teachers?

There were a lot of magnificent teachers—Bill Maloof, Dick Bobbitt, John Bavicchi, Bob Share—each had his own strong suit. Herb Pomeroy had something that cannot be defined. It was a way of getting to the heart and soul of the music very quickly. I was fascinated by that. I remember him rehearsing some very difficult pieces with the recording band. It seemed like the music would never come together. Then we'd begin playing the piece and something would start happening in the room. You could feel this spirit start to rise up out of the music. I looked at the guy next to me and he was feeling it too. We got into it deeper and deeper, and the whole band was playing as one unit, going somewhere we hadn't been before. It was spooky, but moving. When we got done, everyone just looked around wondering what just happened. Herb had this smile on his face that said, "Yeah, that's what it is all about."

Q. What was the first door that opened up for you in L.A.?

When I first got to town in 1967, I was doing a number of things—playing casuals, teaching, doing music copying. It took a long time to get hired as a writer. I did a lot of piecemeal ghost writing. I would write a number for a Vegas act here, a jingle there, perhaps an arrangement for a record. All these things together kept me going. The first real break I got was as an arranger with the *Donny and Marie Osmond* show in 1976.

I got a panic call from a pianist, Tommy Wolfe, who was a special material writer for the *Osmond* show. He said the music director Tommy Oliver needed a last minute chart by the next day. I stayed up all night and cranked it out. The next day around 11:00 a.m. I got a call from Tommy saying I did a great job. He asked me to be a writer on the show. Every week he gave me more and more to write. By the end of the season I was writing the show's finales, which were about 400 bars. It was one of the jobs with a one-day or a day-and-a-half turnaround. You'd be up all night and the copyists were picking up my chart at four in the morning.

I was asked to sub as conductor on the recording sessions for Tommy Oliver a few times and Wayne Osmond was always in the booth watching me work. The next season, Oliver decided not to come back, and I was asked to be the director for the show's third season. At the end of that season, the Osmonds decided to open their own studio in Provo, Utah. They asked us if we wanted to move up there. I didn't want to move, but said I'd help them make the transition.

For the last five shows, I commuted to Provo. I would start writing on Friday, catch a plane to Salt Lake City on Sunday. I would finish the writing over the next two days. When they first opened the studio, they didn't have enough experienced musicians to do the show, so we'd fly in guys from L.A. on a private plane on Wednesday morning. We would do the pre-records that day and then all fly back. I would take a day off and then begin the whole process over again.

Q. A variety show must have been a great training ground for the various styles you write in for *The Simpsons*.

After the *Donny and Marie show*, I did a year of the *Mary Tyler Moore* variety series on CBS, and ghosted for other shows. Not only was it a great training for various styles, but it was the best place to learn to make changes on the stand. You might find out that the choreographer and rehearsal pianist want changes in your chart. You and all the musicians are in the studio with the clock ticking and you have to chop up the chart and still make music out of it.

So you learn to think on your feet and communicate with an orchestra. You are recomposing on the stand, and learning to work under pressure.

Q. You had a hiatus after *Moonlighting* ended in 1989 before your hiring for *The Simpsons* in 1990. How did the new connection happen?

I was talking to a friend of mine lamenting my state. He gave me a tip about *The Simpsons*. I had been so busy with *Moonlighting* for years. That series was considered a classic piece of television; you come off of that feeling pretty good, and then the phone stops ringing. It is a part of the business we all have to deal with whether you are a cameraman, actor, or composer. You can get into the depths of self-doubt when it happens.

Q. You must have seen a lot of changes in post-production technology over the course of your years in the business.

I don't think I could have done either *Moonlighting* or *The Simpsons* without Auricle [time calculation and synchronization software]. It is great for when changes need to be made. Before, if a last minute change happened, you would have to wait while the music editor physically put new streamers and punches on the film. Now, after a few keystrokes, they are in the right place and on you go.

Otherwise, I still work in an old-fashioned way. I write on an acoustic piano with a drafting board on the front, and pencils, erasers, and a straightedge. I have a monitor and a VCR that will play picture and time code hooked up to the Auricle setup. That's all I use.

Q. What is your weekly schedule like?

Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. I am writing. Friday morning, before I go to the spotting session, there is a brief recovery time, but sometimes I may still have cues to write if I didn't finish on Thursday. On Friday, the spotting is at 2:00 p.m., and the recording session goes from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. I try to keep Saturday and Sunday off.

Q. How do you begin the process at the start of each week?

My procedure is to look at the spotting notes and figure out what kind of orchestra I need and if there will be any special instrumentation. I then let the contractor know what my needs are. Once I have the music editor's notes with time code and start and end points for each cue, I'll make a template for each cue in the computer. When I am ready to start a cue, I call it up on the computer. The start time and cue number are already entered, so I can get right to the creative process. So I will scan the cues, and pick a no-brainer to just get my heart started. This is very hard work for me. It is good to start out with something that is very obvious to get back into the routine. Then I know that I am sending out cues to the copy department at Fox and that the list of cues is starting to diminish as the hours go by.

Q. What comes first when you are composing: a melody, a texture, or a chord sound?

Each cue is different, so I can't say if I think of a melody or a harmonic structure first. Many times if there are determined cues—like if Homer is angry and marching over to someone's house—I will center the cue on the pace of his footsteps, and figure out the tempo and the groove. Next, I might approach it from a harmonic standpoint and think of what will illustrate his anger in that tempo. Many times the melody may come last. It is the mood of the cue that exists first, but sometimes a melody will come first. Each cue is different.

Q. Some of the cues on the show are simply a whole-note chord. Are these easy to come up with?

I have a large repertoire of single-chord emotions—happy, depressed, angry, hurt, sad—but they are never quite the same. The character might be a little less sad or whimsical and sad at the same time. There are times when I have spent two or three hours working on three bars of music. As I play the piano I might be thinking this is sad, but too much so, or this is angry but it's too nasty. It is a weird process of elimination in trying to find the right combination of notes to convey the emotion.

For some dark things I may want to write in flat keys, but string players don't like to play in flat keys and they play differently. If something is to be extremely jubilant and heartfelt, D major is great. This has a bearing on things too.

Q. Would you say you are discovering new things as you compose, that you are not just going over what you already know will work?

I discover things all the time. That helps to keep things fresh, and I work hard to keep it that way. I do fall back on some things I've done before from time to time, and there are good and bad sides to doing that. The down side is that duplicating yourself can get boring. The good side is that if you really found the best solution, and if it worked once, you can use it again.

Q. When you do research to write in a certain style of music—one episode called for a klezmer cue—how much time can you give that research?

About 20 minutes. Part of the charm of this job has been learning to distill the essence of a musical style in a very short period of time. Someone on the production team says they'd like a cue to be like a klezmer piece, but they might not know what that consists of. Production assistants get me clips or CDs and I will listen to three tracks and figure out what makes klezmer have that sound. Then I make a spur-of-the-moment decision about what makes it seem like klezmer to these people. It is a very interesting study because what klezmer means to you or me may not be the same as what it means to someone without a musical background. Having to compose something that is harmonically, melodically, and orchestrationally correct knowing that I still have 25 or 30 cues left to write makes me distill pretty quickly.

Q. What are some of the more unusual things you've been called upon to write?

The whole musical palette exists on this series. My background has prepared me for this in a very unusual way. My experiences—being a legitimately trained French horn player familiar with concert band and symphonic literature, loving rock and roll and r&b in high school, becoming a jazz bassist, working weddings, bar mitzvahs, and backing singers in shows, knowing thousands of tunes from playing trio gigs—give me a lot to draw on. It all comes back. In the spotting session today, they asked for a cue sounding like a society band playing at a country club. I knew instantly what I'd do for that.

As a copyist, I'd worked on projects for many great composers. Generally copying is not something you give a lot of thought to, but I find sometimes late at night as I am thinking about what to do on a cue, somebody's score that I copied 20 years ago will flash in front of me. I start remembering what Lalo Schiffrin did with the high strings, and soprano sax doubling the lead violin way above the staff and how it gave a real intense angst. Boom, my answer is there. It is weird how that happens.

Q. If you were to have the time and resources to write and record anything you wanted—as a purely artistic statement—what type of music would you choose to write?

I'd love to write a symphony, that would be thrilling. I might like to write a cappella choir pieces, perhaps Christmas carols like the Alfred Burt carols. I love vocal music. I would also like to write some more jazz band music too.

Q. Given the pressure on the TV series composer, what is it that makes you love this very hard work so much?

On a television job, the instant gratification part is amazing. You can write this relatively large amount of music, then record it and hear it the same week. I can take a piece of film with a certain emotion, and then I have the power to make that emotion go any number of ways through the music. If I am astute enough to pull out the correct emotion, and if my craft is good enough to enhance that emotion, it can make it 10 times as deep as it is on film.

When I take the music to the studio with the right players with the right feel in the studio, it can put goose bumps on your arm. It goes on tape like that and is preserved. Ten years later, I can listen to that cue and the goose bumps will happen in exactly the same place. You have contributed something meaningful and you can preserve it. I am very blessed, how many other jobs can you say that about? It makes all those years of playing casuals and copying music until 3:00 a.m. worth it.

Q. You exhibit a grace under pressure in the recording studio which enables you to get what you need out of the musicians while the clock is ticking. Has that evolved or is it just part of your nature?

Part of it is personality; each conductor is different in his or her demeanor with the orchestra. I gained a lot from teaching and working with players who can't play it right the first time. I learned a lot from Herb Pomeroy and John LaPorta—how patient they were! Herb had this far-vision view of what the piece was supposed to be and knew how to rehearse each section just the right amount of time to get everyone playing it pretty well before putting it all together. I learned that you have to pick things apart but be kind to the players. Some conductors are impatient or nasty to the players. I find that tragic, you are only here once, why not be gracious to your fellow man? I think that will make someone play better.

Q. What is next for you?

Who knows. The funny part about this business is that one phone call can change your life.

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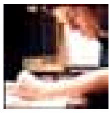

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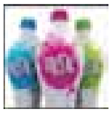

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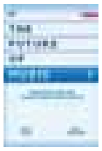

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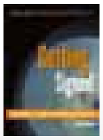

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