

For the SCL Score

Remembering Elmer
By
Michael Isaacson

This past summer has us all reeling from the tremendous loss of Jerry Goldsmith, David Raksin, and Elmer Bernstein. They were three giants in our profession and, if I had only known them through their film scores, their loss would be keenly felt indeed. However, I knew them, additionally, as witty, learned men who possessed great integrity and spoke up on behalf of their colleagues and their art when the times called for it.

While David and Jerry were most cordial and complimentary to me whenever we would meet, the only one of the three that I can say I knew rather well was Elmer. In the late 70's and early 80's I was honored to have assisted Elmer on several TV and Film scores and knew him as it is said "in the trenches". He was always generously instructive, supportive, and above all, kind. Here's one anecdote that will illustrate Elmer's special gift of humanity.

Elmer once asked me to orchestrate the opening title of a large action film starring a then famous martial arts star who also doubled as the film's producer. He called the house one morning and said that the star wanted to have his daughter sing his "theme song" as the main title and would I get her key and orchestrate it for a large "Hollywood" symphony orchestra. My wife Suzy and I drove to the star's gated estate, announced ourselves, and were admitted to his palatial mansion.

His daughter, a sweet but minimally talented singer sang through the song, I recommended some alternate key possibilities, and the brief meeting was concluded. "Just a moment" she added. "My father wants to talk to you."

After a few moments of waiting, the star came out of his guesthouse /studio dressed in an intimidating military workout suit, hiked across the immense lawn and entered the music room where I had worked with his daughter. Without so much as a smile, a hello or a handshake, he barked:

"Make sure the main title music has punch!" As he barked, he threw a punch that mercifully landed an eighth of an inch in front of my nose. I veered back. "Give it punch!" I veered again. "Punch!" and again.

Realizing the guy, with this brutish nature, was totally crazy, I mutely nodded my head in understanding and we quickly escaped out through the reopened gates.

Dutifully, I proceeded to take the song that was originally recorded with two guitars, a bass, and a drum set, and orchestrate it for 26 violins, 8 violas, 6 cellos, 6 basses, 12 woodwinds, 11 brass, 4 tympani, 2 percussion, piano, harp and the 4 original rhythm instruments.

A couple of days later at the recording soundstage, I sat quietly in the back as Elmer

ascended the podium, greeted the musicians, and began to rehearse the main title orchestration. Not so much as four measures went by before this hyperventilating monster of a raging bull star/producer with flaring nostrils stormed out of the control booth shouting:

“He’s ruined it, he’s completely ruined the Main Title!”

Have you ever felt the ignominy of eighty heads malevolently turning your way with one huge piercing look?

I slowly sank down into my seat in silent terror. Elmer, though, was cool as a cucumber.

“What seems to be the problem?” he cheerfully inquired.

The frenzied animal sputtering and steaming in an effort to say anything intelligible was inconsolable. Elmer in his usual faux British (Borough Park, Brooklyn) understatement suggested: “Why don’t we take a ten and listen to the original acetate during the interval?”

The “original acetate”? What was wrong with listening to the original cassette I was originally given? I wondered.

So, an entourage consisting of Elmer’s agent, the raging Toro, his agent, manager, engineers, assorted studio personnel, and half the symphony orchestra piled into the control booth (I inconspicuously remained behind) and replayed the “original acetate”.

Earl, the drummer on this recording date, was different from the drummer on the “original acetate”. Elmer suggested to him that he might play a basic rhythmic feel a bit closer to the original and the high level summit was concluded.

Back on the podium, without changing so much as a single note of the orchestration, Elmer successfully recorded the main title in one take. El Toro once again came bounding out of the booth, leaping onto the podium, bear-hugging Elmer and proclaiming:

“You saved the main title Elmer, you saved the picture!”

I quietly slipped out of the sound stage and went home in dejection. All I could wonder is why I had chosen this absurdity as a way of making a living.

That evening, Elmer, called, sympathized, and instructed:

“Michael you’ve just learned a great lesson in film scoring. There’s absolutely nothing you can’t fix on the stand if you don’t lose your composure. This man obviously having no musical intelligence, could only hear a primal drumbeat, and knew something was different. In hock up to his gated estate in debt, his sense of imminent flop sweat demolished any remnant of sensibility. He was paralyzed with fear.”

“As you observed, however,” Elmer continued, “All turned out well and you have my

thanks for a wonderful job”.

It is I who thank you Elmer; that call meant a lot. Many times since then, this invaluable life lesson has held me in good stead. I'll miss the sensitivity of your music, the professional camaraderie, and, above all, those great stories. Rest in peace.

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