

A PARADOX

Emily Bettison

A soundtrack. A track of sound. Curated music. Music curated to fit the theme, emotions and events of the film.

Synchronisation. Music compiled to support the moving image. Support, compliment, enhance.... An added bonus?

Does a soundtrack exist on the periphery? Are the images and dialogue the centre?
Central to understanding the characters
to understanding their relationships
to understanding where they have come from
and where they seek to go.

But what is a film without music?

A soundtrack. A track of sound. Curated music. Music to tell the viewer how they should feel about a character.

Picture this. A girl, Chrissie, carefree, running through sweeping sand dunes, heading for a swim in the sea. Laughing with excitement, she can't wait to get in the quiet calm water.

She swims out. The waves calmly lapping on the shore, the sun glowing orange...

The music builds. Something is wrong.

To quote Jack Black in *The Holiday* "two notes, and you've got a villain".

A soundtrack. A track of sound. Curated music. An opening song. How can a song set the atmosphere for the entire film?

Picture this. *Mel's Drive-In*. *American Graffiti*. Starring Richard Dreyfuss, Ronny Howard, Paul Le Mat, Charlie Martin Smith. Candy Clark. Mackenzie Phillips. Cindy Williams and Wolfman Jack. Co-Starring Bo Hopkins, Harrison Ford... you get the idea.

Names on a screen, imposed over a still image of an American Diner. You may recognise some names, others you may not. But what is this film about?

“One, Two, Three O, Clock, Four O’Clock Rock. Five, Six, Seven O’Clock, Eight O’Clock Rock. Nine, Ten, Eleven O’Clock, Twelve O’Clock Rock. We’re gonna rock around the clock tonight.”

An upbeat tune. A happy mood. Drawing the viewer into the film. How am I meant to feel? What’s going to happen? Who are these people?

American Graffiti transforms the central and peripheral relationship between film elements, the moving image, the dialogue and the music all equally critical to the viewers experience of the film.

“They said you couldn’t put that much music in a movie”

“You can’t just have a music track going through the whole thing”

“It’s not about anything, you can’t tell four interrelated stories in that way, it’s impossible.”

But you can. and Lucas did. And it is music that links these stories, links these individual lives through a soundtrack that frames each of their individual experiences that night.

For the characters then, the music is peripheral to their experience, performed by a band at their high school dance, played on the radio or broadcast at Mel’s Drive-In diner. A normal part of their lives.

In this way, the music blurs into the background, it fits with the storyline in a natural, unforced way, yet at the same time it joins the characters, allowing the viewer to connect the individual lives of teenagers growing up in this town.

We are not the characters, we exist on the periphery of the film and so the soundtrack, while existing on the periphery itself, is central to our own understanding and film experience.

A soundtrack. A track of sound. Curated music. Existing Inside/Out. Existing both centrally and peripherally.

A paradox? Perhaps.

Emily Bettison is the Dean of Academic Practice at the Academy of Contemporary Music (Birmingham, UK), with a special interest in the academic enhancement of music and creative industry based courses, combining academic rigour with learning experiences that mirror industry practice. Her research focuses on the way that ‘creativity’ is defined, practiced, and negotiated within the industry, organisation and disciplinary boundaries of the radio industry.