

DRAKE UNIVERSITY

A SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT OF THE COEN BROTHERS' USE OF
MUSIC IN THEIR MOVIES

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Everyone who has seen a film by Ethan and Joel Coen has an opinion about their cinematic style. Their distinctive movies feature characters and worlds that are at once realistic and far-fetched, and are so idiosyncratic that one cannot help but feel strongly about their movies, whether positively or negatively. In his book about American independent films, Emanuel Levy describes the Coens as “clever directors who know too much about movies and too little about real life,” makers of movies with stories and characters so outlandish, they could never actually occur in real life.¹ And maybe that’s what makes them interesting; by ignoring how people would typically act in ridiculous situations, they defy expectations. The Coen brothers’ films are known for mixing violent imagery and oddball humor, recasting classic styles within a postmodern perspective. Since hitting it big with *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), they have largely eschewed the big studio system to keep working on small budget films. They like to retain as much creative control over their movies as possible, working with the same general crew and actors from one film to another, and it seems to have paid off: their movies have won numerous awards, including an Academy Award for Best Writing (*Fargo*), and for Best

¹ Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 223.

Writing and Best Motion Picture (*No Country for Old Men*).² They are leaving their mark in the film world, one eccentric movie at a time.

Their use of music reflects their quirky directorial and writing styles. Having worked with the same two music directors in all of their movies—Carter Burwell and T-Bone Burnett—certain musical styles have become closely associated with the different genres of films that they write and direct. The entire Coen catalog can roughly be divided into two general categories: movies that follow broad stylistic traits associated with film noir, which I shall refer to as “Coen noir,” and screwball comedies.³ Some movies blur the boundaries of these genres, or evoke aspects of other styles lying outside these primary genres, but for the sake of this paper, I will use these two categories to classify the films.

In Coen noir films, the soundtracks are mostly comprised of original music written by Carter Burwell. The screwball comedies, by contrast, tend to use much more extant music, usually pop music from the era in which the movie is set. Both categories of movies frequently blur the line between diegetic and extra-diegetic music, but each genre does so in different ways. The Coens use music as they do lighting, cinematography, or any other filmmaking tool: as a means of heightening the drama. It may play in the background as part of a subtle orchestral score, or rise to prominence as a diegetic song, or cause the moviegoer to pay attention to one thing while another, more important event is taking place, or serve to underscore (literally) the surrealism of dream sequences. This paper will explore how music is used in the Coen movies, and show the

² “Awards for Joel Coen,” IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001054/awards> (accessed March 13, 2009).

³ This is such a clear distinction that even the Wikipedia article on the Coen Brothers divides their movies roughly the same way. See “Retro settings and nostalgia” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Coen_Brothers.

relationships between their approaches to different genres and musical styles employed within them.

Bios of The Coens

Both Joel and Ethan were born in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, Joel in 1954 and Ethan in 1957. Both of their parents are university professors: their father, Edward, works in the economics department at the University of Minnesota, and their mother, Rena, is a fine arts teacher at St. Cloud State.⁴ Edward and Rena taught Joel and Ethan the importance of high art; the boys were often taken to the theatre, recalls Ethan, “because it was supposed to be good for us.”⁵ By their own account, the Coen brothers grew up happy but bored. They watched a remarkable amount of TV, especially “Mel Jazz’s Matinee Movie”, a local late-night show that broadcast a wide spectrum of old movies, “one day...8 1/2, and the next day...*Son of Hercules*.”⁶ They also devoured crime novels by James M. Cain and philosophical texts by Aristotle. Bored with midwestern American life, the boys pooled the money they earned by mowing lawns to buy a Super 8 camera, which they used to film remakes of movies they watched on TV, and original movies starring their friends.⁷

Joel went on to attend New York University’s undergraduate film program, which he didn’t particularly enjoy. Ethan attended Princeton to study philosophy, and then

⁴ R. Barton Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen: Contemporary Film Directors* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 6.

⁵ Andrew Anthony, “Masters of the film universe.” *The Observer*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/jan/13/usa.awardsandprizes> (accessed January 28, 2009).

⁶ Alex Simon, “The Coen Brothers: The Hollywood Interview,” *The Hollywood Interview*, <http://thehollywoodinterview.blogspot.com/2008/02/coen-brothers-hollywood-interview.html> (accessed March 13, 2009).

⁷ Carolyn Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2001), 4.

moved out to New York City to be closer to his brother. Joel was working as a film editor for low budget horror movies, when he met director Sam Raimi, beginning a lifelong friendship. Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981), which the Coens edited, was a surprise hit that received praise by Stephen King at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival.⁸ It was Raimi who pushed the Coens into trying out writing and directing their own films, telling them all they needed was the right project and enough financial support. The result: *Blood Simple*, which the Coens wrote during weekends in 1980, then spent the next year raising money to shoot it.⁹ Thus the Coens' moviemaking careers were born.

Carter Burwell

Carter Burwell was an unlikely choice for becoming the Coen brothers' music director for many reasons, not least of which was his stated goal of never breaking into the movie business.¹⁰ A Harvard fine arts major who studied animation and electronic music, he liked performing in clubs and smaller venues; he had never written an orchestral score until *Miller's Crossing*.¹¹ Skip Lievsay, the sound editor on the Coen brothers' first movie, *Blood Simple* (1984), mentioned Burwell's name to the Coens, after seeing him performing in New York clubs. In working on *Blood Simple*, his first movie, Burwell says, "In many ways, *Blood Simple* is my favorite thanks to the blissful ignorance I had of film scoring technique and tradition. I didn't know how to synchronize the music to the film, so I never bothered about working the music around dialogue or

⁸ "Sam Raimi," Horror Directors on Video and DVD, <http://www.horrordirectors.com/samraimi.html> (accessed April 28, 2009).

⁹ R. Barton Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen: Contemporary Film Directors*, 6-7.

¹⁰ Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers* (London: Virgin Books Ltd., 2003), 23.

¹¹ "Biological Facts," The Body, http://www.carterburwell.com/carter/carter_bio_facts.shtml (accessed February 16, 2009).

action... There's something special about the naïveté of the first project, and I advise directors to hire first time composers as often as possible for that reason.”¹² Naïve or not, his first movie score worked well enough; *Time Out New York* said Carter Burwell “evok[ed] a palpable sense of dread with just a couple of piano keys.”¹³ *Blood Simple* started an extended partnership between the Coens and Burwell, for Burwell has said that he and the Coens have an unspoken contract to always work together.¹⁴

Burwell’s music complements the moviemaking style of the Coens on several levels. As Burwell was new to writing music for movies, he was skeptical about working for pushy directors. “I thought they were going to be breathing down my neck, but it was quite the opposite. They were very supportive. They let me do what I wanted to do. I didn’t get a lot of specific instructions from them. They told me what they liked and what they didn’t like, but they weren’t specific about what a piece of music should do.”¹⁵ As the Coens themselves had little musical training and knowledge, they let Burwell do his job with minimal oversight, beyond telling him if a piece of music was too dark or not dark enough. Burwell’s style has been characterized as “chameleon-like, eclectic, unexpected,”¹⁶ with “gripping but simple melodies, incorporating touches of contemporary styles like jazz or heavy metal and quiet, somber, instrument sequences using guitar or piano.”¹⁷ His eclectic approach to film scoring helps him deal with the strange situations the Coen brothers typically spotlight, and meshes well with their own

¹² “FAQ,” The Body, http://www.carterburwell.com/carter/carter_faq.shtml (accessed February 16, 2009).

¹³ “Blood Simple,” The Body, http://www.carterburwell.com/projects/Blood_Simple.html (accessed February 17, 2009).

¹⁴ Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers*, 24.

¹⁵ Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers* (London: Orion Publishing, 2000), 124.

¹⁶ Philip Brophy, “Carter Burwell in Conversation,” in *The Coen Brothers’ “ Fargo,”* ed. William G. Luhr (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 128.

¹⁷ Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers* (London: Orion Publishing, 2000), 124.

idiosyncratic “rules” of how to make movies. For instance, if a standard thriller soundtrack employs sporadic, jarring timpani rolls during a scary scene, Burwell might opt to use contemporary pop music to contrast with the heavy mood of the scene or make the situation appear ironic, as in *Blood Simple* when the country-pop song “He’ll Have to Go” is heard after an awkward, tense phone call in which the jilted husband tells his wife’s lover that he knows about her infidelity with him. If a love theme seems appropriate, he might use silence, such as in many scenes between the two protagonists in *Intolerable Cruelty*. Burwell’s use of music highlights many of the unpredictable quirks of the Coens’ film style, which makes their partnership a fundamental aspect of their films.

T Bone Burnett

Joseph Henry “T-Bone” Burnett has worked with the Coens on what might be called their most music-centric films, *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *The Ladykillers*. Burnett grew up in Texas, producing blues, country and rock and roll albums for other artists and occasionally recording his own music while in his twenties. He moved to Los Angeles in the early 1970s to keep producing and performing, landing a spot on Bob Dylan’s “Rolling Thunder Review” tour in 1975, playing guitar and singing. He produced his first solo album in 1972, and has released more than 10 albums over the course of 35 years.¹⁸

He first teamed up with the Coen brothers as the musical archivist for *The Big Lebowski*.¹⁹ The partnership worked out well enough that in 2000, when it came time to begin work on *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coens turned to Burnett to help score

¹⁸ “Bio,” T Bone Burnett, <http://tboneburnett.com/bio.html> (accessed March 24, 2009).

¹⁹ “T-Bone Burnett,” IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0122439/> (accessed April 13, 2009).

and produce “a soundtrack of ‘old-timey’ American music performed by musicians relatively unknown to the public at large.”²⁰ Burnett was both composer and music producer, and took home four Grammy awards for the soundtrack, which sold over 9 million copies and stayed on the Billboard chart for over a year.²¹ The success of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack led the Coens and Burnett to organize two concert tours, “Down From The Mountain” in 2002 and “The Great High Mountain” in 2003.²² In 2002, the Coens and Burnett formed DMZ Records, a joint venture with Columbia Records, which has put out soundtracks for films such as *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *The Ladykillers*, another Coen film for which he wrote for and produced the music.

Film Noir and The Coens

Six of the Coen Brothers’ movies can be classified as film noir: *Blood Simple* (1984), *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *Barton Fink* (1991), *Fargo* (1996), *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). The love of the genre comes from Joel and Ethan’s youth, in which they watched classic noir movies on television and read many crime novels, especially these of James M. Cain, an American journalist and author of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*.²³ Film noir is a French term meaning “black film,” typically applied to American movies from the 1940s, that emphasize “a fatalistic, despairing universe where there is no escape from mean city streets, loneliness, and death. Stylistically, noir emphasizes low-key and high-contrast

²⁰ “Bio,” T Bone Burnett, <http://tboneburnett.com/bio.html> (accessed March 24, 2009).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Petri Liukkonen, “James M. Cain,” Books and Writers, <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jmcain.htm> (accessed April 4, 2009).

lighting, complex compositions, and a strong atmosphere of dread and paranoia.”²⁴ What makes the Coens’ noir movies slightly different from traditional noir is that there are always absurdist or blackly humorous moments in their films, which is not common in classic film noir, such as the aliens that land at the end of *The Man Who Wasn’t There*. Also, their use of lighting conflicts with classic noir style, as the Coens associate light with a negative connotation and represent darkness as safe and good, especially in *Blood Simple*. Also in *Blood Simple*, the characters are classic noir characters only in part: the cuckolded husband portrays is “all bark and no bite,” and the cheating wife isn’t “a villainous seductress.”²⁵ Musically, the Coen noirs differ from their screwball comedies in a few key ways.

Silence

The Coen Noir movies use silence to heighten the drama. Scenes that people would expect to have music in the background have either ambient noise or no sound at all. Carter Burwell has claimed “There’s just too much music in movies, almost always more than I think there should be. It’s either lack of confidence on the part of filmmakers or a tradition of scoring things. It’s always better to have less than to have more.”²⁶ No movie better exemplifies Burwell’s preference for musical restraint than *No Country for Old Men*. In the entire movie, there are only 16 minutes of music, including the eight minutes accompanying the closing credits.²⁷ The silence definitely builds tension for the

²⁴ “Film Dictionary,” DePauw University, <http://www.depauw.edu/acad/film/Dictionary.asp> (accessed April 4, 2009).

²⁵ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 17-19.

²⁶ “Biography for Carter Burwell,” IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001980/bio> (accessed April 30, 2009).

²⁷ Dennis Lim, “Exploiting Sound, Exploring Silence,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2008, 1.

audience; “it is not a popcorn movie,”²⁸ in that the silence connotes that this isn’t light entertainment. Not only is there very little music, but the characters themselves often remain silent for long stretches of time, thus forcing the audience to listen to either ambient sounds in the environment, or nothing at all. The audience thus receives few (if any) aural clues for plot development, which makes any event that much more surprising when it occurs. Silence heightens the drama by making the audience feel uncomfortable and by taking away a safety net for the audience, in that music makes the movie feel more artificial, less like reality. People’s lives don’t have music in the background, and Burwell knows that silence makes it feel more realistic, disturbing and tense.

Ethan Coen and Carter Burwell initially decided to keep music to a minimum, and Joel agreed after seeing the first rough cut. Burwell worked closely with Skip Lievsay, the sound editor, which rarely happens; the sound editor and composer usually only meet “at the final mix where everyone will be arguing about what should be the loudest.”²⁹ The idea was to use diegetic sounds as much as possible, especially those that sound like they emanated from the environment; this meant that vocal or instrumental sources are kept to a minimum due to their clear musical associations. The sounds heard during the movie are drones of various sorts, many coming from extra-diegetic Buddhist singing bowls and the sound of air streams from the compressed air gun used by the psychotic Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem). The rest of the sound comes from diegetic traffic, crickets, and air ducts.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., passim.

³⁰ Philip Brophy, “Blast of Silence: Listening to nothing in “No Country for Old Men,”” *Film Comment* 44, no. 2 (March/April 2008): 16.

Barton Fink also has long periods of silence. Although the film features a newly-composed orchestral score, it is not used extensively. In this movie, set in 1941, silence is used less for a general dramatic effect and more to illustrate the title character's writer's block. Barton Fink (John Turturro) is a writer who has had a couple of successful plays based on "common people" in New York. He accepts an offer to move to Hollywood to write a wrestling movie but finds himself with a major case of writer's block after writing the first sentence. Multiple times throughout the movie, Barton sits down to write in his hotel room, and nothing happens. No words come to him, and no music is played in the background. The movie's silence is Barton's silence. When he starts to daydream, ethereal strings and bells can be heard accompanying the sounds of waves and birds, transporting him to a different place, a daydream where there's no writing to complete. But if he focuses back on the typewriter, the music stops. As long as he is unable to write, there is silence. Occasionally, as he is writing, there will be a synthesized long tone in the background, but it's always unchanging and non-progressive, just like Barton's script. Towards the end of the movie, however, he is able to write a full script, and music accompanies the scenes of him furiously typing.

The movie *Fargo* presents the story of a kidnap-for-hire that goes terribly wrong.³¹ Set in Minnesota during the late 1980s, the audience is introduced to Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), who is in desperate need of money to pay off a debt. He hires two hitmen, Carl (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear (Peter Stormare), in Fargo to kidnap his wife so that her rich father will pay \$1 million in ransom money, but they botch the kidnapping, which leads to an unplanned series of murders. The cop investigating the

³¹ The film claims to be "based on a true story," but Ethan writes that the movie only "pretends to be true." (Luhr 18).

case is the very pregnant Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), who works as a police officer while her husband stays home to paint. Burwell wanted to use music to bring out the loneliness of the characters. “It’s all stated in the opening theme with harp and solo violin, which bring out the lonely qualities in these characters. Then it gets completely overblown with the orchestra and percussion come in...I wanted the movie to be bombastic enough that you might just believe it was a real police story and yet, also through bombast, maybe make you laugh a little bit.”³² The silence that accompanies many scenes brings out the loneliness people in Minnesota feel when outside driving along the frigid barren stretches of highway, where a lot of the movie takes place. Many times during silences, all that can be heard is the wind whistling through the fields. The silence also makes the violent scenes more realistic, such as the first half of the infamous wood chipper scene, in which Gaear disposes of his accomplice Carl’s body. There is no musical gloss to make it stylized, only the savage sound of machinery.

Character Themes

Most of the Coen brothers’ movies use musical themes to represent characters, but Coen noir uses this much more thoroughly. Burwell says he questions with “what should define the score’s musical themes—to what should I attach then? . . . Typically in Joel and Ethan’s work, I do attach themes to characters [as a leitmotif] because their writing is very character-oriented. Often their films will simply have one or two characters, and you see almost the entire film through their eyes.”³³ In *Miller’s Crossing*, the protagonist Tom (Gabriel Byrne) is an advisor to a mob boss during the Prohibition. He tries to keep

³² Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers*, 172-3.

³³ William G. Luhr, ed., *The Coen Brothers’ “Fargo,”* 131.

the of peace between warring Italian and Irish mobs, getting himself stuck in the middle of a fight of loyalties. The opening theme of the movie is an Irish folk tune, a theme of the Irish mob that Tom helps guide. At one point, Tom's life is surely in danger because he was supposed to kill Bernie (John Turturro) for the Italian mob to gain their trust and save his own life. The Italian mob members and Tom go out into the forest in search of the body that Tom knows won't be there, because he didn't kill Bernie. One of the Italian gangsters starts singing an Italian song ("La Ghirlandina"³⁴) while they're walking through the forest, bringing out the obvious opposing forces at work. When either mob is present in the film, a song representing their nationality is often playing somewhere, either diegetically (e.g., the Irish mob boss Leo listening to a record of "Danny Boy" as assassins arrive to kill him) or extra-diegetically (the main theme plays in the background when Verna (Marcia Gay Harden), the leading lady, visits Tom at his apartment), reminding the viewer as to which side we are currently watching.

Blood Simple tells the story of a love triangle that leads to murder. Ray (John Getz) works at a bar owned by his friend Marty (Dan Hedaya), and is also sleeping with Marty's wife, Abby (Frances McDormand). Marty suspects the affair and hires a private investigator, Visser (M. Emmet Walsh), who confirms his suspicions. Marty then hires Visser to murder both Ray and Abby, but instead of doing that, Visser steals Abby's gun, doctors some photos to make it look like he killed them, takes the money from Marty, and shoots him with Abby's gun, leaving him for dead. Ray comes to the bar to demand back wages, and discovers the bloody scene, with Abby's gun laying near the body. He wants to clean everything up because he thinks Abby has done this and wants to protect

³⁴ Mike McKiernan, "Miller's Crossing Trivia," The Ultimate Gangster and Crime Film Website, <http://www.geocities.com/mikemckiernan/mctrivia.html> (accessed May 1, 2009).

her. He starts to clean up the mess when Meurice (Samm-Art Williams), another bartender, comes in. Meurice calls for Marty, gets no response, and puts on his “theme song,” The Four Tops’ “It’s the Same Old Song.” This song shows up at multiple points in the movie, such as when we first see the bar, and at the very end of the movie as a sort of denouement. This song is appropriate to link with Meurice, a Detroit native, who prefers Motown to the country music the bar’s patrons prefer. By putting it on when Ray is trying to drag Marty’s body out to the car, Meurice gives Ray cover without realizing it. Meurice’s theme song covers up all the sounds and occupies Meurice long enough for Ray to attempt to clean up the blood.

Newly Composed vs. Stock music

The Coen noir films and the screwball comedies also differ in the amount of newly composed music they feature. Coen noirs rely much more heavily on newly composed music, giving Carter Burwell opportunities to explore ideas for sounds rarely used in movies, and to show off his composing abilities. *Blood Simple*, for instance, has only a few instances of pre-existing music (such as the Four Tops’ “It’s the Same Old Song”); Burwell wrote the rest for the movie. The score is fairly minimal and shows off Burwell’s piano training, for the main theme to the movie and most of its soundtrack is written for solo piano. The score is subtle to the point of near obscurity, drawing attention to itself only when intense drama is happening onscreen, such as when Meurice almost catches Ray after the murder of Marty. The starkness works: a reviewer from

Time Out New York remarks on Burwell's ability to "evok[e] a palpable sense of dread with just a couple of piano keys."³⁵

In *Miller's Crossing*, Carter Burwell had to do something he had never done before: write an orchestral score. Says Burwell, "In *Miller's Crossing*, we all agreed that it should be an orchestral score, but we also knew that I knew nothing about orchestral music! That didn't faze [Joel or Ethan] at all."³⁶ For the score, Burwell introduced Irish thematic elements to complement the character of Tom Reagan, played by Irish actor Gabriel Byrne. These elements include heavy use of flute and oboe and also standard Irish tunes, such as "Danny Boy" and "Lament for Limerick." The character was never meant to be Irish, but at the audition, Byrne asked if he could try it in his own accent, and the Coens liked it.³⁷ Byrne contributed a list of Irish traditional music to the directors, and Burwell based one of his main themes for the movie off of a song on the list, "Come Back to Erin Carter."³⁸ The opening and closing credits of the song utilize another Irish theme, entitled "Lament for Limerick," a piece Burwell scored for oboe and strings. These two themes act as a leitmotif for both Tom and the Irish mob, playing often in the background of scenes in which the two are present, and also alerting us at the beginning of a scene as to whether or not they will be in it.

Screwball Comedies and The Coens

The other half of the Coen brothers' catalogue falls into the genre of screwball comedies. These movies include *Raising Arizona* (1987), *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994),

³⁵ "Blood Simple." The Body. http://www.carterburwell.com/projects/Blood_Simple.html (accessed February 17, 2009).

³⁶ Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers*, 87-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

The Big Lebowski (1998), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), and *The Ladykillers* (2004). Screwball comedies feature ridiculous scenarios happening to average people. Usually, the characters in these movies possess few heroic or antiheroic qualities. The scenarios they find themselves in are completely out of the ordinary, and they possess no skills with which to deal with them. The music for these films relies heavily on contemporary pop music, and is specifically chosen to highlight the tensions between the different types of people in the movie.

Contemporary Pop Music

In *The Big Lebowski*, we follow the story of Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), a Los Angeles slacker with a penchant for bowling, who gets mistaken for millionaire Jeffrey Lebowski, who is in debt because of his wife. According to Burwell, “the premise of the music in the movie is that this character, Jeff Lebowski, kind of scores his own life with his 8-track collection.”³⁹ *Select* magazine said that it seemed like Quentin Tarantino and the Coens had exchanged scripts for *Big Lebowski* and *Jackie Brown*, the latter for its fluid camera style and the former for its use of 1970s pop music.⁴⁰ Burwell worked with T Bone Burnett, who acted as musical archivist and picked out which songs would be used. The star of the soundtrack is Bob Dylan, whose song “The Man in Me” is used in the first dream sequence after The Dude is punched out by nihilists. Unconscious, the Dude dreams about flying over Los Angeles until he realizes he has a bowling ball in his hand, which causes him to fall into a bowling alley where he gets stuck in the ball and is thrown down the lane at a set of pins. “The Man in

³⁹ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Me” is The Dude’s theme song, for like the man in the song, The Dude will do what is asked of him.⁴¹ Early in the movie, as we see The Dude falling asleep on his rug listening to the Venice Beach League playoffs on his headset, we can also see the B side of the tape marked “Bob,” most likely Dylan.⁴² Another important group is Creedence Clearwater Revival, The Dude’s favorite band, heard when The Dude is driving home after retrieving his stolen car. To calm down, he plays “Looking Out My Back Door” while drinking a beer and smoking a joint. He doesn’t, however, appreciate the Eagles’ music, which gets him kicked out of a cab after an exchange with the driver:

The Dude: Jesus, man, could you change the channel?

Cab Driver: Fuck you man. If you don't like my fuckin' music get your own fuckin' cab!

The Dude: I had a rough...

Cab Driver: I pull over and kick your ass out!

The Dude: Come on, man. I had a rough night and I hate the fuckin' Eagles, man!

The Dude’s life revolves around music, and on a bad night, the Eagles just weren’t cutting it for him. The Dude never explains why he hates the Eagles, but it might have to do with the major commercial success of the Eagles compared to the laidback vibe of Creedence Clearwater Revival. The Dude might consider the Eagles mainstream success to lessen their value as a California stoner band. The Eagles’ song “Hotel California” is actually used in the movie, but is performed by the Gypsy Kings and is used to represent the Dude’s bowling nemesis, Jesus (John Turturro).

In *The Ladykillers*, a remake of a 1955 British comedy, there is an abundance of hip-hop music, especially that of the Nappy Roots. The plot relies heavily on music, in that the protagonist, G.H. Dorr (Tom Hanks), a Southern professor, creates a chamber

⁴¹ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 234. The first line of the song is “The man in me will do nearly any task,” and the Dude has proven himself to be the same way, for he tries to help out the Big Lebowski by doing whatever is told of him.

⁴² Carolyn Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 148.

music group as a cover for a casino heist. He rents out a room from Marva (Irma P. Hall), a gospel-loving old lady, because her house is in prime location to rob the casino boat. Marva does not like hip hop music, as we learn in the first scene when she goes to the police to complain of loud “hippety-hop” music being played by one of her neighbors. The songs chosen from the Nappy Roots are those that focus on money and trouble, such as “Another Day Another Dollar” and “Trouble of this World.” The songs are present when different African-Americans are onscreen, whether on a boom box as they listen to the music, or as background music, such as when The General’s (Tzi Ma) doughnut shop gets robbed. This “hippety-hop” music directly contrasts with the classical music that the chamber music group is supposed to be practicing and performing. When introduced to other members of the gang, no music is playing because of the setting in which we meet each character: props man Garth Pancake (J. K. Simmons) is shooting a commercial, football player Lump Hudson (Ryan Hurst) is at a football game, and The General’s store is being robbed, with the only music heard being that from the thieves’ car. None of these gentlemen appear to be the type who knows anything about classical music, much less know how to play a lute or a sackbut.

Simon and Garfunkel is the chosen music for much of *Intolerable Cruelty*, one of the few movies the Coens directed but did not write themselves. It was written by Robert Ramsey and Matthew Stone, who had at first asked the Coens to help rewrite the script, and eventually they took over as directors.⁴³ The film opens and closes with “The Boxer,” a song that serves as a metaphor for the fight between smarmy divorce lawyer Miles (George Clooney) and gold-digger bombshell Marilyn (Catherine Zeta-Jones). The opening shows an aging soap opera producer catching his wife in bed with the pool

⁴³ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 311.

boy—interestingly, they don't have a pool—and then getting attacked by his wife when he pulls a gun on the duo. The wife attacks him with his daytime Emmy, stabbing him with it in the butt before making a getaway in his Jaguar, “The Boxer” blasting as she drives away. The movie uses very little newly composed music, opting instead for pre-existing songs by Simon and Garfunkel (“The Boxer”), Elvis (“Suspicious Minds”), and Tom Jones (“If I Only Knew”). This stock music is definitely the primary focus; the newly composed material Burwell wrote for the movie is both stereotypical and generic, which is the point. His music is what one would find in any other movie, with schmaltzy love themes and standard ominous sounds for tension. This is appropriate because the movie uses stereotypes everywhere, from the first scene when the husband comes home to find a van in his driveway (with the subsequent adulterous discovery) to the scene where Miles is supposed to give a speech to a convention of lawyers about the standardized prenuptial agreement he wrote and made famous, and instead of reading his speech off of the prepared cards he has, he rips them up and speaks from the heart about the virtues of love. Though there are definite Coen moments of eccentricity—especially the courtroom scene with Kraus, the Baron von Espy—this movie doesn't really fit the Coen mold because they didn't write it. Their lack of control over the writing extended to their control of their usual musical devices. Because they weren't able to write in moments for the music to be anything more than background, the music isn't as integral a part here as it is in their other films.

Tension Highlighted by Music

The Coens' screwball comedies often employ music to draw attention to the opposing forces in the movie. In *The Ladykillers*, the main conflict deals with the spiritual world, defined by the religious Marva, and the material world, displayed by Dorr, a thief who pretends to be a classical musician. The first scene of the movie shows Marva walking into the police station to make what is obviously another complaint about her neighbor's blasting A Tribe Called Quest's "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo." The connection between hip hop and money lust has begun.⁴⁴ The next scene shows Gawain (Marlon Wayans) listening to Nappy Roots' "Another Day Another Dollar" at the casino, a big dollar sign chain around his neck. Later, after Dorr's gang has stolen the money, "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo" plays again. While hip-hop is the representation of materialism, church music represents the innocent and respectable spiritual world. When Dorr first asks to rent a room and rehearsal space from Marva, he insists that he and his group will not play any hip-hop, only church music, and only as modern as the Rococo period. (Ironically, the Catholic Church renounced music of this period because of its ornate style and complexity, which was deemed worldly.)⁴⁵ If Marva had any training in music history, she would realize that her views on hip-hop matches her church's historic views on Rococo music. In response to the hip hop theme of the movie, "Another Day Another Dollar," gospel music represents the spiritual side in "Let Your Light Shine on Me," sung by her church choir at a service she attends.

Hudsucker Proxy highlights musical tension more subtly. The movie follows the story of Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins), a recent Muncie Business School graduate who

⁴⁴ Ibid., 333.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 336.

gets a job at Hudsucker Industries as a low-level mailroom employee in 1959 New York. As he gets his first big job to deliver a letter to the boss, little does he know that the boss has actually just jumped off the 45th floor to his death. The other business executives concoct a scheme to hire an idiot to take over the company so that the stock falls and they can all buy it up and start over. Norville fits the bill, but little do they know that his invention for kids—the hula hoop—will cause the company stock to skyrocket, not crash. At the beginning of the movie, Norville is a blue-collar worker, one of the lower-level grunts in a giant corporation. As he suddenly finds himself at the top of the power structure, he initially keeps his working class ideals, but eventually the white-collar attitudes catch up to him. An undercover newspaper investigator, Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who has been secretly investigating the whole scam, is shocked to walk into his office one day to a string quartet playing Mozart’s “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” in the corner while he sits at his desk. The company has taken a turn for the worse, people are about to lose their jobs, but Norville spends money on music traditionally played for nobility and is having a large sculpture of himself being made.⁴⁶ The tensions between blue collar and white collar come to a head. Throughout much of the movie, music by Aram Khachaturian is used (such as “Spartacus” and “Sabre Dance”).⁴⁷ It’s important to note, however, that while Khachaturian may have claimed to be writing music for the people, the Soviet concept of The People at the time was a government-controlled concept. Composers of the early-mid twentieth century were supposed to write music that used and sounded like folk music to bolster national support of the country. In 1948, Khachaturian was charged with “bourgeois tendencies” by the Communist Party and then

⁴⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 151.

was condemned in 1953-1958.⁴⁸ Much like how a large company might hold events to keep morale up and punish naysayers, Khachaturian had to conform to rules from people higher up than him, much in the same way Norville has to. The fact that Mozart is now used instead of Khachaturian is telling of how much Norville has changed.

Raising Arizona, the Coens first attempt at comedy, is a story about recidivist H.I. “Hi” McDonnough (Nicholas Cage) who falls in love with and marries policewoman Edwina (Holly Hunter). Ed wants Hi to live the straight life, and she thinks having a baby will settle him down. She soon finds out, however, that she is unable to conceive. Going against their plans to become law-abiding citizens, they kidnap Nathan Jr. (T.J. Kuhn), a baby boy out of a set of quintuplets whose father is Nathan Arizona (Trey Wilson), an unpainted-furniture tycoon. The idea of leading a straight life versus one of violence and being an outlaw is ever present in the movie. At one point, Ed tries to calm Nathan Jr. by singing him a lullaby, “Down in the Willow Garden,” which the lyrics “My race is run, beneath the sun/The scaffold now waits for me/For I did murder that dear little girl/Whose name is Rose Connelly.”⁴⁹ Ed and Hi want a good, law-abiding life for Nathan Jr., but she sings to him about murder and hangings. It speaks somewhat to folk music with its ever-present theme of violence, but she could have sung a different song if her ambitions are to have a son following the straight life. If Ed wants Nathan Jr. to lead a law-abiding life, she isn’t setting him up for one. He’s been kidnapped, his father keeps robbing convenience stores, and she sings to him about murder. This lullaby returns as the leitmotif for Hi’s nightmare of Leonard Smalls (Randal “Tex” Cobb), otherwise

⁴⁸ “Aram Khachaturian,” Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316019/Aram-Khachaturian> (accessed May 11, 2009).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 62.

known as the Biker of the Apocalypse. (I will address the significance of this later in the paper).

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

O Brother is arguably the most musical of all the Coen Brother movies, both in terms of plot and amount of music it features. Some have argued that *O Brother* is a musical: *Rotten Tomatoes* reviewer Jonathan Romney describes *O Brother* as three movies in one: “a tale of three desperadoes on the lam in rural Mississippi; a blues and country musical; and, allegedly at least, a rewrite of Homer’s *Odyssey*.”⁵⁰ In an interview by Jim Ridley with the brothers, Ethan says the movie “isn’t literally a musical.”⁵¹

However, in a different interview, Ethan says “Music is such a big part of this movie, it’s almost a musical [...] Not that there’s scenes of characters bursting unmotivated into song, but there’s a lot of music in it, and it’s kind of the *raison d’être* of the movie.”⁵²

Other movies that use music as an integral feature but aren’t considered musicals include *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), two movies which feature music but aren’t musicals in the classic sense. The *Dictionary of Film Terms* defines a musical film as “a motion picture that incorporates the conventions of song and dance routines into the film story and in which the musical numbers serve as an accepted element in the film narrative.”⁵³ While *O Brother* uses lots of music, the characters never all start singing songs in place of having conversations, nor do they start performing

⁵⁰ Jonathan Romney, “Double Vision,” in *Joel and Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, ed. Paul A. Woods, 176-180 (London: Plexus Publishing, 2003), 176.

⁵¹ Jim Ridley, “Brothers in Arms,” in *Joel and Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, ed. Paul A. Woods, 181-183 (London: Plexus Publishing, 2003), 182.

⁵² Jim Bessman, “Coen Bros. Movie Features Bluegrass,” *Billboard* 112, no. 43 (October 21, 2000): 35.

⁵³ Frank Eugene Beaver, *Dictionary of Film Terms: The Aesthetic Companion to Film Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 170.

choreographed dances spontaneously. The music is there because the film is about music, not because the film is a musical.

O Brother is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*. We follow the story of Everett Ulysses McGill (George Clooney), a man stuck on a chain gang breaking rocks in Mississippi in the 1930s. He escapes with two accomplices, Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) and Pete (John Turturro), and hilarious antics ensue. They are trying to make it to Everett's home, where there's buried loot that might be lost when a new dam will flood the valley if they don't get there quickly. They get in one scrape after another on their way there, but all survive, and even put out a best-selling record as "The Soggy Bottom Boys." After meeting guitarist Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King), who sold his soul to the devil for guitar talent, the boys cut a quick song entitled "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow" at a rural radio station. This song becomes the theme song of the movie, shooting the boys to quick fame.

Music is used in *O Brother* as a way of examining American history. "The soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou* ranges from African American hymns ["Down to the River to Pray"] to work songs ["Po Lazarus"] to a Jimmie Rodgers pop song ["In the Jailhouse Now"] to a putative hobo ballad ["Big Rock Candy Mountain"] ... To the album's producer, T-Bone Burnett, like Alan Lomax or Ben Botkin before him, the American folk tradition is elastic enough to encompass all of these genres and artists, and he freely sprinkles them across the soundtrack."⁵⁴ Song is used to explore racial tensions, economic woes, and life's burdens, all themes of the American South in the early

⁵⁴ Benjamin Filene, "O Brother, What Next?: Making Sense of the Folk Fad," *Southern Cultures* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 54.

twentieth century.⁵⁵ Racial tensions are examined throughout the movie, from Everett saying The Soggy Bottom Boys need to disguise themselves as black in order for their type of music to be accepted, to the use of the work song “Po Lazarus” in the opening scene. The chain gang is almost entirely made up of black men, singing while they break rocks. A reference later in the movie is made to Parchman Farm, a penitentiary in Mississippi “infamous for degrading prisoners, especially blacks.”⁵⁶ One of the overarching themes of *O Brother* is the desire to mete out justice over the tyranny and abusive power of those in charge. “Po Lazarus,” sung by blacks and sounding much like a slave song, shows that “decades after its abolishment, the roots of slavery were still strong among in the form of cheap labor and unjust punishment.”⁵⁷ Economic woes are highlighted in “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues,” with opening lyrics “Hard time here and everywhere you go / Times is harder than ever been before / And the people are driftin’ from door to door / Can’t find no heaven, I don’t care where they go.” As *O Brother* is set during the Great Depression, many people in the south were hit hard and left homeless. Life’s burdens come out in “Man of Constant Sorrow,” with lyrics such as “I’ve seen trouble all my day,” and “It’s fare thee well my old lover / I never expect to see you again / For I’m bound to ride that northern railroad / Perhaps I’ll die upon this train.” The song that shoots the Soggy Bottom Boys to fame is fairly depressing in nature, but it’s loved by whoever that hears it, for in southern twentieth century America, the lyrics strike a chord with everyone that hears it. The music also sounds much more upbeat than the lyrics suggest.

⁵⁵ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 265-7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The music of *O Brother* was well received outside of its movie setting. The soundtrack received 5 Grammys at the 2002 Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year, Best Compilation Soundtrack Album, Best Country Collaboration with Vocals for "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow" by the Soggy Bottom Boys, and Best Male Country Vocal for "O Death" by Ralph Stanley, and Producer of the Year for T Bone Burnett.⁵⁸ The movie also spawned a concert/documentary entitled "Down from the Mountain" featuring the musicians from *O Brother* performing the movie's music. The DVD includes performances not just of music from the movie and soundtrack, but also songs not heard in either. The *New York Times* review explains "It was the music, after all—a miscellany of blues, gospel, field hollers and bluegrass breakdowns—that lent emotional weight and historical resonance to the Coens' exuberantly silly pastiche of Southern folklore, Preston Sturges and Homer's *Odyssey*."⁵⁹ Without the music, *O Brother* would be just that: a comedic retelling of Homer's wild tale. The music makes it feel more real, more epic, just like the story on which the movie is based.

Crossover Techniques

Certain characteristics are common in all of the Coen brothers' movies, the most recognizable of which is the sudden change from diegetic to extra-diegetic music, or the inability to tell whether or not the music is diegetic or extra-diegetic. This happens in some form in all of the movies mentioned in this paper. *The Big Lebowski* uses Townes Van Zandt's "Dead Flowers" extra-diegetically when The Dude is spreading his friend's

⁵⁸ BMI, " 'O Brother' Soundtrack Rules 44th Annual Grammy Awards," BMI <http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/233081> (accessed February 19, 2009).

⁵⁹ A.O. Scott, "Down From the Mountain Film Review: A Feel-Good Ode to Ol'-Time Music," *New York Times*, June 15, 2001, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E01E5D91631F936A25755C0A9679C8B63> (accessed May 1, 2009).

ashes. The song follows him as he goes to the bowling alley, but when the Dude starts talking to the bartender, the music becomes more distant and tinny, as if being played over the bowling alley's speakers, now diegetic. After the narrator finishes his monologue, the music resumes to full volume and better sound quality, indicating the music has shifted back to an extra-diegetic context. This shift from diegetic to extra-diegetic settings is extremely common. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, a scene opens with a Beethoven piano sonata playing in the background that later turns out to be performed by the character Birdy (Scarlett Johansson). In *The Ladykillers*, while digging through the wall of an earthen basement, classical music plays diegetically on the record player, but as the crew continues to progress through the tunnel, the music seems to switch to being extra-diegetic because it doesn't get any quieter the further the group gets away from the record player. Perhaps the best way to show how this style sums up the Coens' use of music is to consider the movie *Paris, je t'aime* (2006). In this movie, twenty different filmmakers are given five minutes each to tell a story based on love set in Paris. The Coen brothers sketch uses one of their favorite actors, Steve Buscemi, in a sketch about a tourist who gets caught waiting for the Metro across from two paranoid lovers. For the length of the sketch, there is guitar music in the background. It's not until the end of the sketch that the camera cuts to a musician panhandling in the Metro that we realize that the music was actually diegetic for the entire scene, even though the musician is only seen in the last few seconds. In five minutes, the segment uses the one technique that characterizes the use of music in Coen brother movies.

Besides switching from extra-diegetic to diegetic music (or vice versa), certain songs tend to be used multiple times in throughout Coen movies. In *The Big Lebowski*,

the opening song is “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” by Bob Nolan, played extra-diegetically as we watch a tumbleweed roll across a field, then segues into diegetic Muzak in a grocery store where The Dude is buying cream to make white Russians, and then returns to extra-diegetic background music when The Dude arrives at his apartment. The song returns halfway through the movie, when the narrator meets The Dude in the bowling alley, for “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” acts as a theme for the narrator. This time, the song is diegetic, played over the bowling alley speaker system.

Many songs also change forms throughout the course of a Coen Brothers movie. In *The Ladykillers*, the tension between the worlds of religious and hip-hop music comes to a head with two entirely different versions of “Trouble of This World.” In the first instance this song is used, we hear a rap version performed by the Nappy Roots blasted from a boom box by the casino janitor, Gawain, who comes across more as a thug than a churchgoer. Further into the movie, the song is performed in Marva’s church by a full gospel choir as a lively hymn, sans rap. The same song performed in two different ways displays the tension between the main opposing forces in the movie: material vs. spiritual. The same sort of thing happens in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The main song (“Man of Constant Sorrow”) is first recorded only for voices with guitar accompaniment. It returns at the end, however, with a full band backing up the singers, though we’ve never seen the song rewritten for a larger band. The same song is also used in live performances and also over the radio, switching from diegetic to extra-diegetic.

Focus on a Classical Composer/National Style

Many of the Coens' movies heavily use music associated either with a classical composer or a conspicuously national style. *Miller's Crossing*, for example, uses lots of music based on Irish folk songs. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, set in northern California during the 1940s, Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) is a barber whose wife Doris (Frances McDormand) might be cheating on him with her boss Big Dave (James Gandolfini). Ed's lack of interest in this subject might mean he's homosexual, a topic that is implied throughout the movie through learning that he hasn't had sex with his wife in years. Erica Rowell points out "he and Doris do not have sex; Ed won't "prance" at the possibility that Doris and Dave are having an affair; he isn't the "he-man" Big Dave is; he kills Dave with a small, woman's weapon, as the gay Mink does in *Miller's Crossing*; he refuses Birdy's sexual come-on."⁶⁰ He meets openly gay businessman Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito) who piques his interest in entering the dry cleaning business. In one scene, Tolliver makes a pass at Ed, which Ed nonchalantly brushes off, perhaps too easily for a straight male from a small town in 1940s USA. Problems arise, however, when he accidentally murders Big Dave, for which his wife ends up being blamed. He must hire lawyer Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub) while his wife is in jail. Meanwhile, he befriends Birdy (Scarlett Johansson), a teenage girl who plays the piano. She is not a very important character in the movie, but her piano music plays a big role in the movie. She is only ever shown playing Beethoven Piano Sonatas, which score much of the movie, either in their original form or as Burwell's compositions in the same style. Burwell's score focuses on Piano Sonata No. 8 (*Pathétique*), but No. 14 (*Moonlight*), No. 23 (*Appassionata*) and No. 25 are also used either in their original form

⁶⁰ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 288.

or as rewritten orchestral works for the score.⁶¹ Beethoven might be used to contrast Ed's monotone monologue and speaking style, for Beethoven's sonatas are particularly moving. Ed's love of Beethoven might also come from his ambiguous sexuality. In his article "Music, Pathology, Sexuality, Beethoven, Schubert," James Webster compares reviews of works by Schubert, who many claim to have been gay, to Beethoven's works, whose sexuality has never been questioned in academia. Webster asserts "As long as [Beethoven's] music is valorized so highly, his personality "in" the music will be described not in terms of pathology, but rather with mythic tales of the overcoming of suffering, of the artist as visionary, of transcendence and utopia. By contrast, most critics who have detected reflections of the man Schubert in his instrumental music have done so under the sign of neurosis."⁶² If Ed is hiding his sexuality, he might find escape and solace in Beethoven's sonatas, beautiful works that come from a heroic, manly composer.

Khachaturian is the composer of choice for *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Khachaturian was an Armenian composer who wrote expressively for the people, not the upper class.⁶³ The opening scene features the adagio of "Spartacus and Phrygia," from the four-act ballet "Spartacus," a "theme of compelling beauty" used to evoke the sentimentality and hope that Norville has for landing a good job out right out of business school.⁶⁴ The ballet "represents above all a triumph of spiritual values and humanity," which fits perfectly into the main tension of the movie between hardworking blue collar workers

⁶¹ Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers*, 262.

⁶² James Webster, "Music, Pathology, Sexuality, Beethoven, Schubert," *19th-Century Music* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1993): 91-2.

⁶³ Margarita Ter-Simonian, "Aram Khachaturian is 100," Embassy of the Republic of Armenia, <http://www.armeniaemb.org/DiscoverArmenia/CultureArt/AramKhachatrian.htm> (accessed April 25, 2009).

⁶⁴ Luis Sundkvist, "Aram Khachaturian's ballet "Spartacus,"" The Russian Graduate Seminar Group, http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:35p6xHi0AisJ:groups.pwf.cam.ac.uk/mmlgsems/rusgrad/text/Spartacus_handout.pdf+review+khachaturian+spartacus+adagio+phrygia&cd=8&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a (accessed May 2, 2009).

and unethical white collar workers.⁶⁵ The ballet is about a slave rebellion in ancient Rome, which mirrors Norville's fight "against powerful forces in the name of freedom and nobility."⁶⁶ Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance" is heard when Norville's hula hoop is produced for sale, and just when it looks like the toy will fail, a frustrated toy store owner throws one down the street, where a lone boy walking along finds it, starts playing with it, and is immediately thronged by other kids wanting one of their own. The price of a hula hoop skyrockets and Norville is on the road to major success. The "Sabre Dance" starts playing when the boy starts having fun with the toy. The music is happy and patriotic, highlighting the triumph Norville has had with his simple invention. Burwell's own compositions for the movie follows the same style of Khachaturian, evoking a patriotic and nostalgic feel, perfect for scoring a movie about overcoming abusive power.

Fargo's main score centers around Scandinavian and American folk music, especially "Ashokan Farewell," written by Jay Ungar and popularized by the PBS miniseries "The Civil War."⁶⁷ Burwell focused on Scandinavian music because "all the characters have Scandinavian names and their accent is somehow derived from a Scandinavian accent...I thought it would be interesting to inject some Scandinavian feeling into it. There is a "coldness" in a lot of Scandinavian music, not so much with the melodies, but with the way instruments are played."⁶⁸ In Burwell's eyes, Scandinavian music uses lots of solo hardanger fiddle, which evokes a sense of loneliness. He orchestrated his score with low winds, brass, percussion, and a few string instruments in the same way Hungarian composer Miklos Rosza (*Ben-Hur* (1959)) would, a composer

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 151.

⁶⁷ Christopher Sharrett, "Fargo, or the Blank Frontier," in *The Coen Brothers' "Fargo,"* ed. William G. Luhr (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 134.

Burwell likes and emulates.⁶⁹ Burwell chose the musical style not just because the characters of Minnesota and Fargo are all Scandinavian, but also because the music fits the setting. Burwell says that the hardanger fiddle has “a glistening effect” much like snow and fits the vast open spaces shown in the movie. Scandinavian music “take[s] itself seriously,” which was important to this movie so that the audience would believe they were watching a true story.⁷⁰ While the movie has many parts that would be ascribed to a comedy, including comedic dialogues and dark humor accented by thick Minnesotan accents, the movie tries to be a true crime story that doesn’t give itself away in the music. When composing the Coens’ comedies, Burwell tries to highlight the ironies with his musical compositions and selections, so that the music “is telling you something different to what you are seeing on the screen.”⁷¹ In *Fargo*, the musical ironies were kept to a minimum so that the plot would really be the focus, the music a background.

Dream Sequences

Many of the Coens’ movies involve dream sequences, either as a result of an injury, sleep, or daydreams. Every one of these dreams is scored by music, either as background music or as a main part of the dream. Two movies that use music during dream sequences particularly effectively are *Raising Arizona* and *The Big Lebowski*.

Raising Arizona is a movie where dreams meet reality in the form of a biker from hell named Leonard Smalls. It all starts when Hi steals Nathan Jr.: after stealing the baby, Hi has a dream of a giant biker dressed in black leather with guns and a penchant

⁶⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁰ Ibid..

⁷¹ Ibid., 132.

for destroying small animals. Smalls's scenes are almost always scored with synthesized operatic music paired with the sound of wind blowing across open prairies. Once Hi commits to staying completely legal, every time he does something wrong, Smalls appears. What makes Smalls ambiguous as to whether he's actually a dream or not is that other people can see him, too. Smalls makes a stop to visit Nathan Arizona Sr. in order to offer his services of finding his missing baby. In a later scene, Ed also sees him, which surprises Hi into asking "...D'you see him too?" This might imply that everybody has some bad in them, so everybody is able to see the biker. In a fight scene between Hi and the biker, Hi is dragged along the ground behind the motorcycle and gets up without a scratch, which implies Smalls can't be real, but after Hi gets beaten up, his bruises from his fight with Smalls appear real.

The music that accompanies Smalls is described in the script as "eerily beautiful singing, a woman singing a lullaby. Faintly, behind the singing, there is also a droning high-pitched noise."⁷² This ghostly music acts as Smalls's leitmotif, following him through every scene and alerting the audience to his presence. If Smalls truly is a figment of Hi's imagination, the music might represent why Smalls exists in Hi's mind. Hi didn't dream up the biker until he stole the baby, which is why the biker's unearthly theme is a lullaby. Perhaps Ed's murderous lullaby sung to Nathan Jr. earlier in the movie seeped into Hi's unconscious, only to reappear in his dreams of Smalls.

The Big Lebowski features two dream sequences, a smaller one where the Dude flies over Los Angeles to Bob Dylan's "The Man in Me" after falling asleep listening to bowling on his Walkman. The other one is a result of the Dude drinking a drugged White

⁷² "Raising Arizona," IMSDb, <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Raising-Arizona.html> (accessed May 10, 2009).

Russian given to him by Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara), a porn publisher who kidnaps the Dude because the other Lebowski's wife owes him money and Jackie knows that the Dude is somehow involved. After passing out, the Dude dreams an elaborate Busby Berkeley-style dance sequence, complete with title screen "Gutterballs." "Gutterballs" exists in two parts: the first half, a sort of choreographed bowling fantasy, the second half, a nightmare of castration. The first half references many Busby Berkeley movies, including *Gold Diggers of 1935* in which the Dude is a tiny speck creating a huge shadow against an expansive wall, and *42nd Street*, which uses a camera shot through many sets of female legs.⁷³ Berkeley was a choreographer famous for representing the female form and, arguably, sex in his choreography.⁷⁴ This fits in with the pornographic subtext of the movie, for the Big Lebowski's wife Bunny (Tara Reid) was in a porno entitled "Logjammin'," and the nihilists are led by porn producer Jackie Treehorn.

The dream starts with the Dude wearing an outfit similar to the one Bunny's costar wore in "Logjammin'," work coveralls and a tool belt. Mickey Newbury's "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)" plays in the background. He dances into a bowling alley and selects his shoes from an infinitely high tower of shoes. Dancers are everywhere, wearing headdresses of bowling pins. The Big Lebowski's daughter Maude (Julianne Moore) stands in the middle of the girls dancing, dressed like a Valkyrie with a bowling ball breastplate. The Dude helps Maude throw a ball down the lane between the dancers' legs. Like in his last dream, the Dude becomes the bowling ball, and he floats down the lane, looking up the dancers' skirts as he goes.

⁷³ Erica Rowell, *The Brother's Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, 223-4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Once he hits the pins, the music turns into a dark, ominous instrumental passage, and the nightmare begins.

In the second part of his dream, the Dude is accosted by men in red spandex body suits, each carrying a massive pair of scissors. The men are the nihilists who threatened the Dude earlier that if he didn't pay them the money he owes Jackie Treehorn, they were going to castrate him. This is a case of mistaken identity, for it's the Big Lebowski, not the Dude who owes money. The scissors come at the Dude threateningly in his dream, before the Dude finally wakes up running down the street, being chased by a police car. The music used in the first half plays along with the drug and alcohol themes of the movie, with the lyrics "Found my mind in a brown paper bag again / Tipped on a cloud and fell eight miles high."⁷⁵ The entire first half is much like a musical with the dance sequence and happy-go-lucky feel. The Dude's world, like the dream sequence, centers around four main things: bowling, drinking, drugs, and music. The second half of the sequence uses much more scary, experimental sounds, reminiscent of 1970's acid rock. The nightmare is like a drug trip gone bad.

Conclusion

The Coen Brothers' use of music in movies is one of the key reasons their movies do so well. Their sensitivity to how they use music in each scene really makes their films come alive. Compared to other famous director/composer pairs, such as George Lucas and John Williams, the Coens and Burwell are much more subtle. All of us remember the Star Wars theme, but do we remember how it was used in specific scenes throughout

⁷⁵ "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In) Lyrics." MTV Lyrics. http://www.mtv.com/lyrics/newbury_mickey/just_dropped_in_to_see_what_condition_my_condition_was_in/5555549/lyrics.jhtml (accessed May 10, 2009).

the movie? Did the theme ever shift from diegetic to extra-diegetic, and change instrumentation and form? The music is always important in a Coen Brothers movie, but it doesn't try to steal the limelight. Their musical selections can be used to highlight emotions, send an ironic message, even confuse the audience. There is always a reason why a song ended up where it did in the movie, even if it's not immediately obvious. While music might not be the first thing people notice about their movies, the Coens obviously treat music with as much care as the other components of their movies. As writer Aldous Huxley once said, "After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music."⁷⁶ The Coen/Burwell/Burnett partnership use both silence and music to get their point across, in whatever way they can. Music is part of the story, a device essential to make their movies interesting and worthwhile.

⁷⁶ "Aldous Huxley Quotes," Brainyquote, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/aldous_huxley.html (accessed May 13, 2009).

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