



Interview

Bill Conti

By Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb

(Hollywood (USA), August, 9th, 1999)

-You was born in Providence, Rhode Island, like the famous film music composer Irving Gertz, specialized in Sci-fi films and others monster movies (Alligator People, The Deadly Mantis, It Came From Outer Space, The Monolith Monsters, among others) ...

-Really, I did not know ! It is quite funny !

-What is your musical background? Did you have a musical family?



-Yes, my grandfather was a musician. I began studying piano with my father, an accomplished pianist, sculptor and painter. My grandfather and him played often extracts of opera at the piano after the dinners. For me opera was wonderful. When I sang the main parts, I saw film scenes in my mind ! Later I thought "Where else to write dramatic music and get paid"? I like to write my music as a professional and get paid. You can write opera today but you have to teach in school. After that, I went to Louisiana State University to study bassoon and Juilliard School of Music in New York, with Hugo Weisgall, Vincent Persichetti, Roger Sessions and Luciano Berio. I went to live in Roma for seven years...

-Why?

-Because in 1967 my teacher in composition and opera in Juilliard, Hugo Weisgall, crossed the Atlantic to be composer in residence at the American Academy, in Rome, where he was elected. So, he invited my wife and me to follow him.

-Your "Rome years"...

-Well, when I was in Rome, I began playing piano in night clubs. Like Ennio Morricone, I began doing arrangements for several and various Italian singers. In the continuation, and naturally, I worked very closely with film music composers like Bruno Nicolai, Henri Mancini, Riz Ortolani, Piero Piccioni, Mario de Sica or Lalo Shiffrin among others, for films no one has never heard ![laughs]. We all busy. At the Venice Song Festival, in 1971, I met American director Paul Mazurky to be musical supervisor on his film, *Blume in Love*. Mazurky encouraged me to return in United States. I arrived in California in 1972, but was not famous. One year after, I worked again with Paul Mazurky on *Harry and Toto*, a film about a man and his cat. Art Carney's Oscar win for Best Actor brought national attention to the film and the score. Soon after, I was asked to compose the score for the film that would launch my career to new heights, *Rocky*.

-Why your good beginning of collaboration with Paul Mazurky suddenly stopped after Blume in Love (1973) Harry and Tonto (1974), Next Stop, Greenwich Village (1976) and An Unmarried Woman before just continuing in 1998 with the TV movie Winchell ?

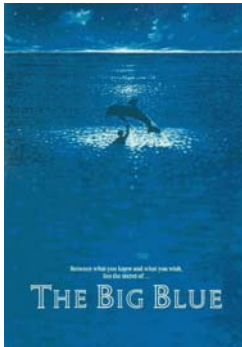


-I do not know! But, you see, it is the business. If the director does not call... I did not do *Rocky 4*, and I do not know wether I'd ever do *Rocky 6* ! I do I have not contract for life with any director ! The

directors "cast" the composer like an actor. Every picture is different than the last. In general if the producers are different, the collaborators are also different on the project. In fact, it depends who has the power, the director or the producer...

-Audience forgot John Huston stared Sylvester Stallone in a film scored by yourself (Victory, 1981) ! How was the musical challenge with this mythic director?

-John Huston was old at the time. At the spotting, I asked him where the music showed up. He said "put it wherever you want". There was another director who worked like that and that was John Cassavetes. He said "Bill, do the music", that was very nice and very rare! At the beginning, he has no idea about the composer. John Cassavetes suggested John Huston and said him "Bill will do the music!". It is very nice... and very rare ! He has no exact idea. He was not at the scoring sessions.



-Your filmography includes notable compositions for the US version of The Big Blue (1988, original music by Eric Serra), for the US version of William Richert's film A night in the Life of Jimmy Reardon (European music by Elmer Bernstein) and the US version of A Prayer for the Dying. How can you work in these cases? Can you really forget the previous scores, especially for The Big Blue?

-When Jerry Weintraub bought *The Big Blue* for America, he did not like Eric Serra's score. He called me to watch the movie. After the screening, he said me : "What do you think?". "I think the score is fun!". "I don't like it: I want you do a new score!". I said "OK!". It is very simple. Because he has the money to distribute the film in America. But my score is really different than the Serra's score. It is not the same approach. The CD is not available because the film was a flop in USA. No success, no CD !

-You worked a lot with Sylvester Stallone or for films starring Sylvester Stallone. Could you speak us about your relationship with him and about his conception of music in film?

-I met him during *Rocky* after shooting the movie, but we did not talk about the music. I spoke with the director only. In 3 weeks and one recording session (live) the movie was done. After that, I worked with Stallone on *Rocky II* and *III* and on an interesting film, *Paradise Alley*, directed and starred by Stallone himself. He always agree my music. He always like "strong" music, not music for mind. We have no problem for scoring, Stallone likes accessible melodies, because he listens all kind of music and he loves music and vocals.



-You worked many times with John G. Avildsen on Karate Kid II (1989) For Keeps (1988) Happy New Year (1987) Rocky V (1990) The Formula (1980) Slow Dancing in the Big City (1978) Rocky (1976) among others. What is your relationship with this director?

-He loves films. If he comes through the door today, it's with a camera in his hand. Very early, he begins talking about the music unlike some directors who like to have a rough cut, John will show you a scene. We have a wonderful relationship with John. I love to work with him. I met John for the first time in 1975 for a film called *W.W. and the Dixie Dancekings* with Burt Reynolds. He wanted me for the film score, and I remember I played him some of music at the piano. But Avildsen was a very bad relationship with Bruce Reynolds during this film and the studio wanted someone else for the music [Dave Grusin, nda]. On *Rocky*, John remembered me and I finally did the film.

-How do you work? Is it the idea, the mood, the feeling... ?

-With music, always the feeling because music is emotional not intellectual. Even in the *Rocky* movies, John said "We must make the people think that he has a chance" and he showed me some film, that was before videotape, he shows me Stallone doing pushing. He said "Give me one minute, so I can cut the film, then I need 30 seconds more, and 30 seconds". Just pieces and it ended up being 3 minutes. To get that training montage in *Rocky*. Now of course we have a videotape and a computer. It runs along with the *Digital Performer*, by sequencer and you can see the film all the time.

-Do you do the orchestrations yourself?



-Not any more. Jack Eskew has with me during a long time. I give him a sketch on 4 or 5 lines. I note on the sketch every melody, every harmony, every rhythm every

counterpoint. Jerry Goldsmith or John Williams, we all do that on 6 lines ! Sometimes, the orchestrator could be a simple copyist ! But the orchestrator brings more: the "color". It is unique. But, all the good composers can do a full score, CAN only. Because today, in many movies, it is more and more difficult to do your own orchestrations. So, there is all a new generation of guys who can do their orchestrations.

-Don't you think the Hollywood system today gives less and less time for a musician to compose and sometimes on blockbuster films, the composer become a kind of "hammer"...

- It can be...Someone has to make effective music, whatever the way any composer does it, the result for the director or the producer, for someone who doesn't know, is the same. Today, we have many people who can make the result. I don't have a problem being an "elitist", to be educated in music, but when someone who is not educated can put the right sound in the right place...It's not Beethoven!

-Do you use synthesizers to create this "color" ?

-Yes, I . But only for demonstrations to directors or producers. I cannot hear by electronic music all the solutions in music or in orchestration ! For my computer, I use *Digital Performer*, a sequencer in mosaic notation. Jack Eskew, my orchestrator, has the same program and I give him my music on a disk. After his work, he gives the disk to the copyist who has the same program. Jo-Ann Kane Copy Services, for example, are entirely did by computers. Since 1992 or 1993, and more and more, you can create your music in Midifile at home and send the music by internet at your orchestrator or at the copyist. Film music is an industry. Film music collectors cannot imagine that !

-What is your conception of music in film?

-For me, music conveys the emotion. It reinforces the emotion. Sometimes there are also technical reasons. The emotional reason is the first one, to take a message, an emotional message : the same message as in the film, a different message as in the film, and when there is no message in the film, the music can take the message. Or, if the cutting seems too erratic, the music can smooth out some of the technical things in the film, and if the scene is too slow, for example, the music can improve that. But it's mostly emotion..



-What about the utilization of twelve-tone music in film?



-I have used it. But, not for a whole score. Just like fugues in counterpoint. I use that a lot. Unfortunately twelve-tone music has been an exercise for the head, but not for the heart. Sometimes, twelve-tone music denies the emotion. Sometimes, of course, because Schönberg or Webern are very emotional. But in films you can only use it in horror films, not in a love story. It is very difficult to use twelve tone music in an emotional way. It's been done. But everyone wants the immediate reaction. Film music has to be effective the first time, not the second time. For some difficult music like 12-tone music, you have to hear it more than once to begin to understand how good it is. But not in films. If it doesn't work the first time, it's gone.

-Each year since 1985, you are the musical director for the Academy Awards telecast, the famous show produced by Gil Cates [Emmy Award for best music for the 64th Academy Award telecast and Emmy nominations for the 63rd and 65th shows]. What do you think about what Cates said: "Bill Conti is a superb composer and conductor. His work always adds tremendously to the spirit of the show. All the musical artists on the Academy Awards love working with him" ?

-It is very nice. I like the differences. Music for films, you do for the producer and the director and there is the musicians. And you do the music. If it smiles, that's great. If it doesn't smiles, you do it again, you change, you find the way to make the director smile. Middle-live music, like the Academy Award show, it's making music immediately perceptible for an audience, and it's a very difficult work. You won't make a mistake. So, the pressure... If you make a mistake in a studio, it's clinical, you do it again, you can change, but when you do a show you can't make a mistake !

-Who chooses the musicians?

-For the Academy Award Show, I use the musicians I use all the time. Fifteen musicians and sixteen singers. It is important to have a good communication. Because, before the Oscar for Best Score, we do not know the name of the winner, we know only the five nominees. So, we have to know five pieces of music. When Billy Crystal says "The winner is...", you have to play the right piece. I have, and the musicians have also the five scores exactly in point of view, to play instantaneously the piece of the year.



-Example: if a musician makes a mistake... A violinist plays Mulan instead of Titanic...

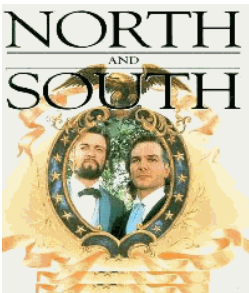
-IM-PO-SSI-BLE ! [laughs] Nobody can make a mistake ! If a player can make a mistake, it would be conceivably the trumpeter during a solo just at the beginning of the piece.

-Who chooses the theme played in live. A movie includes a lot of themes. Why always the Main Title?

-I do not know. We ask to the composers "If you win, which theme do you want?". Each composer send to the Academy the theme he prefers. So, each year, in February, ten orchestrators begin orchestrating each theme nominated, because the music is originally orchestrated for 60 or 80 musicians, and not for 40, the size of the Academy Award Orchestra.

-Joker accepted to these question... It is right last year Jerry Goldsmith was approached to conduct the Academy Award ceremony ?

-[silence] Yes. But he did not do it... I do not know why ! He phone me once, because he understood the concept of my formulas. He said me I say yes or no. I do not know why he declined. Ask Jerry !



-How would you define your style and your influences in film music?

-Melodic. Music must have memorable melody. Because film is an opera to me. I do not want the music be a "background music" or just a wall paper. I am influenced by composers of the Italian opera: Puccini, Verdi, Respighi. Richard Strauss influenced a lot of film music composers during the 30's and 40's, especially in Venice. What music was in Venice? It was the Germanic school of Wagner. There was between Italian composers like Respighi and people like Richard Strauss, the same approach of the melody, a kind of musical language. It is not known in the history of film music today ! Respighi was the teacher of Friedofher !. Today, in films or in opera, we all have a language influenced by these pioneers !

-Betrayed (1988) is considered like one of the worst film by Costa-Gravas...

-Strange relationship. I never met him. I wrote the score at home. Costa-Gravas was in France, and I sent the music to Paris, on audio tapes...



-Could you tell us more about your last movie Thomas Crow Affair. This is a real challenge working after Michel Legrand?

-It is not important to me. Michel Legrand's score is wonderful. But, it is a jazz score to a film made in the 60's. So, Pierce Brosman, Rene Russo and the director John Mc Tiernan saw the previous version of the Norman Jewisson film, with Steve Mc Queen. Finally, the Mc Tiernan's film is really different, he did not want a new score like Michel Legrand. It is a different approach.

-Do you compose concert music?

-No. But, it is not a kind of auto satisfaction. Concert music is really different than film music. It is not the same language. A music for a classical work is just written for music. A music for a film is composed for the screen. If I compose a classical piece, it is just for a

command. Influences in concert music? Maybe the concert music of John Williams, the *Violin concerto* for example.



-Recently, a lot of bootleg CD of your music was released, including A prayer for a dying and The right Stuff/Karate Kid. What are your reactions about this despicable illegal stuff?

-How is possible. I have the original tapes upstairs ! I never give money with these scores. Perhaps the studio has copies, but it is not the interest of the studio to sell bootlegs ! But, you know, a film composer do not win a lot of money with the CD's. Jerry Goldsmith for example sells more, and he love have his music on records. He is very conscientious about this aspect of the business. But for the others, film music edition is a kind of racket ! I hate racket. Each recording session cost

-Looking back on your long musical career, do you have any regrets?

-[silence] Look!... It 'is nice, no? I have a house built in 1926, I have a 50 foot powerboat and an Harley-Davidson Softail Heritage Classic. It is wonderful ! I am very happy. I have enough money after this career to live quietly with my wife. Why regrets?



-Perhaps working very closely with famous "author" directors, perhaps for other else than action films...

-No. How many directors, how much money, how many different orchestras I had in my life? [silence] Do you know you have only to do to have a good relationship with a director in Hollywood? You have to eat with him ! I am very carefully with that. Perhaps I am not a great filmography with a lot of prestigious directors, but I prefer eat with someone I like. It is a choice...



Photo by Lester Cohen

Bill Conti proudly displays the Golden Soundtrack Award presented to him at ASCAP's tenth annual Film and Television Music Awards on May 3. *Pictured (l-r) are Academy Awards producer Gil Cates, presenter Talia Shire, Conti and ASCAP President and Chairman of the Board Marilyn Bergman.*

BILL CONTI

COMPLETE FILMOGRAPHY

Thomas Crown Affair, The (1999)

Inferno (1999)

Real Macaw, The (1998)

Wrongfully Accused (1998)

Winchell (1998) (TV)

Spy Hard (1996)

Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story (1996)

Bushwhacked (1995/I)

Napoleon (1995)

Tenderfoots (1995)

Scout, The (1994)

Next Karate Kid, The (1994)

8 Seconds to Glory (1994)

Yellowstone (1994)

Bound by Honor (1993)

Adventures of Huck Finn, The (1993)

Rookie of the Year (1993)

Nails (1992) (TV)

Dynasty: The Reunion (1991) (TV)

By the Sword (1991)

Grand Canyon (1991)

Necessary Roughness (1991)

Year of the Gun (1991)

Rocky V (1990)

Operation, The (1990) (TV)

Backstreet Dreams (1990)

Captive in the Land, A (1990)

Fourth War, The (1990)

Lock Up (1989)

Cohen and Tate (1989)

The Six Million Dollar Man and the Bionic Woman (1989) (TV)

Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story (1989) (TV)

Lean on Me (1989)

"American Gladiators" (1989) TV Series (theme)

Karate Kid III, The (1989)

Grand bleu, Le (1988) (US version)

Betrayed (1988)

For Keeps (1988)

I Love N.Y. (1988)

Night in the Life of Jimmy Reardon, A (1988) (US version)

Masters of the Universe (1987)

"Napoleon and Josephine: A Love Story" (1987) (mini) TV Series (theme)

Prayer for the Dying, A (1987)

"Mariah" (1987) TV Series (theme)

Baby Boom (1987)

Broadcast News (1987)

Happy New Year (1987)

Io e papà (1987) (TV)

"Our World" (1986) TV Series (theme)

Karate Kid, Part II, The (1986)

"North and South II" (1986) (mini) TV Series

Big Trouble (1986)

Boss' Wife, The (1986)

F/X (1986)

Niagara: Miracles, Myths and Magic (documentary) (1986)

Nomads (1986)

Stark: Mirror Image (1986) (TV)

"Colbys, The" (1985) TV Series

"North and South" (1985) (mini) TV Series

Gotcha! (1985)

Beer (1985)

Rocky IV (1985)

Stark (1985) (TV) (theme)

Coolangatta Gold, The (1984)

Karate Kid, The (1984)

Unfaithfully Yours (1984)

"Master, The" (1984) TV Series

"Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" (1984) TV Series (theme)

Bear, The (1984)

Grand Canyon: The Hidden Secrets (1984)

Mass Appeal (1984)

"Emerald Point N.A.S." (1983) TV Series

Bad Boys (1983)

Terry Fox Story, The (1983) (TV)

Right Stuff, The (1983)

Two of a Kind (1983)

Without a Trace (1983)

Farrell for the People (1982) (TV)

I, the Jury (1982)

Rocky III (1982)

"Cagney & Lacey" (1982) TV Series

Split Image (1982)

That Championship Season (1982)

Neighbors (1981)

"Falcon Crest" (1981) TV Series

Victory (1981/I)

Carbon Copy (1981)

"Dynasty" (1981) TV Series

For Your Eyes Only (1981)

"Murder Ink" (1980) TV Series

Formula, The (1980)

Gloria (1980)

Private Benjamin (1980)

Rocky II (1979)

Goldengirl (1979)

Dreamer (1979)

Fantastic Seven, The (1979) (TV)

Man, a Woman and a Bank, A (1979)

Seduction of Joe Tynan, The (1979)

F.I.S.T. (1978)

Unmarried Woman, An (1978)

Big Fix, The (1978)

Five Days from Home (1978)

Harold Robbins' The Pirate (1978) (TV)

Paradise Alley (1978)

Ring of Passion (1978) (TV)

Slow Dancing in the Big City (1978)

Uncle Joe Shannon (1978)

In the Matter of Karen Ann Quinlan (1977) (TV)

Kill Me If You Can (1977) (TV)

"Andros Targets, The" (1977) TV Series

Handle with Care (1977)

Sensitive, Passionate Man, A (1977) (TV)

Smash-Up on Interstate 5 (1976) (TV)

Rocky (1976)

"Executive Suite" (1976) TV Series

Displaced Person, The (1976) (TV)

Next Stop, Greenwich Village (1976)

Pacific Challenge (1975) (documentary)

Harry and Tonto (1974)

Blume in Love (1973)

Liquid Subway (1972)

Giardino dei Finzi-Contini, Il (1970)

Juliette de Sade (1969)

Sudario a la medida, Un (1969)

No Year:

There's Always Room (TV)

Traveling Hopefully (documentary, Norman Lear Films)

Princess Diana Funeral (TV, CNN)

Good Morning America (TV, ABC)

Turning Point (TV, ABC)

EARTH Force (TV Theme, ParamountTV/CBS)

Instant Recall (TV Theme, Viacom/CBS)

Inside Editions (Theme, King World Productions)

Prime Time Live (TV Theme, ABC)

ABC Sports (TV Theme, ABC)

ABC News (TV Theme, ABC)

The company (TV, Warner Bros)

Dolphin Cove (TV, Paramount)

Kenya (TV documentary, ABC)

Supercarrier (TV, Lorimar)

HeartBeat (TV Theme, ABC/Spelling Productions)

Silent Whisper (TV Theme, Spelling Productions)

Business Week (TV Theme, ABC)

O'Hara (TV Theme, ABC)

Television Commercials:

- Sprite
- Honda
- Coca Cola
- Pizza Hut
- Knxt Television & Radio
- CBS News
- CBS Movies
- Merrill Lynch

AWARDS

Academy Awards Nominations



1976: Best Original Song *Gonna Fly Now* (from *Rocky*)

1981: Best Original Song *For Yours Eyes Only*

1983: Best Original Score *The Right Stuff* **WINNER**

Golden Globe Nominations



1976: Best Original Score *Rocky*

1978: Best Original Score *Unmarried Woman*

1981: Best Original Score *For Your Eyes Only*

Emmy Awards Nominations



1985: Music Composition North and South

1990: Creative Concept The New York City Marathon **WINNER**

1990: Composer The New York City Marathon **WINNER**

1990: Music Direction 62th Annual Academy Awards

1991: Music Direction 63th Annual Academy Awards

1992: Music Direction 64th Annual Academy Awards **WINNER**

1993: Music Direction 65th Annual Academy Awards

1994: Music Direction 66th Annual Academy Awards

1995: Music Direction 67th Annual Academy Awards

1997: Music Direction 69th Annual Academy Awards

1998: Music Direction 70th Annual Academy Awards **WINNER**

1999: Music Direction 71th Annual Academy Awards

Certified Gold and Platinum Albums



- **Gold Album (500,000 copies) Soundtrack for *Rocky***
- **Platinum Album (1,000,000 copies) Soundtrack from *Rocky***
- **Gold Single (1,000,000 copies) *Gonna Fly Now* from *Rocky***
- **Gold Album (500,000 copies) Soundtrack from *Rocky III***

