

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

Fall 12-13-2019

Whatever Happened to the Movie Theme Song?

Luka Vasic

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/356

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Whatever Happened to the Movie Theme Song?

Music is as important as it's ever been in film, but our idea of what a theme song is—and if it matters—has evolved

By Luka Vasic

Who can forget that moment at the theatre when the picture goes blank with the exception of the words “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,” and suddenly the high squeal of trumpets blast in your ears as big yellow letters that read “STAR WARS” fill the empty space on your screen? If sci-fi and fantasy aren't your thing, then how about the classic whistle and “wah waah waaah,” call and response playing over a close-up of Clint Eastwood's squinty eyes in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*? Or those two repeated notes that anxiously build up to the reveal of the shark in *Jaws*?

An effective theme song can absorb you into the world of a film's story or have you leaving the theatre with its melody stuck in your head for years to come. Movie music is about as old as cinema itself, and has changed from live performances, to original scores, pop tunes and eventually compilations. The way we make films has also changed, and so have budgets, technology and audience tastes—and with them, so have theme songs. In modern film, the right choice of a pre-existing tune can blow an original composition out of the park, while sometimes the less flashy the scored music the better.

Some of the most memorable theme songs in film history have come from multi-installment franchises, from classics like *Rocky* and *Indiana Jones*, to series like *Mission Impossible* and *Jurassic Park*. However, outside of existing IP like these franchises, in modern filmmaking there doesn't seem to be as much of a desire to link longform multi-film plots through grandiose thematic music, the best example being the box office

domination of theme song lacking superhero films. Though the use of a theme song can be one of the most memorable parts of many classic films, as well as highly valuable storytelling device for the films they support, in modern cinema scored theme songs can also feel dated.

The definition of a theme song isn't always as simple as "[Title of Movie] Theme Song" or "Main Title," but those tunes are a good place to start. Like the way classic television utilized its jingles up top or near the beginning of every episode, films ranging from the early silent era approximately through the 1980s (with some exceptions) began with an opening credit sequence, the movie title and of course, accompanying title theme music. Traditionally these opening themes would be original instrumental compositions, like the big band piece that opens *The Pink Panther* (1963), but they also included new vocalized pop songs, like the theme from *Grease* (1978). In some cases, both an orchestral theme and a pop song theme exist. The opening credits from *The Searchers* (1956) even features them back to back.

The use of original popular music soundtracks and compilations became a trend following Simon & Garfunkel's contribution of both new and previously released music in the 1967 film *The Graduate*, which spawned an early version of their chart topping hit "Mrs. Robinson," and this is still a useful and popular way of designing modern film soundtracks. But in 1977, John Williams' approach to theme song creation in the *Star Wars* films, as well as his other late seventies and early eighties soundtracks like *Jaws*, *Superman* (1978) and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, was very much rooted in classical music and the old way of film scoring.

More traditional composed title themes, like the famous opening crawl that kicks off every *Star Wars* film, often encapsulate the tone of the film or hint at things we will see or hear later on. These kinds of themes will often incorporate short melodies of songs used

later in the soundtrack, the same way an Overture or Prelude would in classical music, opera or theatre before movies ever existed. For instance, the 1960 horror classic *Psycho* begins with opening credits accompanied by a piece of music that composer Bernard Herrmann even titled “Prelude.” The film’s cold open teases at the same scary violin rhythms that we associate with Hitchcock’s famous shower scene later in the film, as well as other melodies.

“There might be one overall theme melody like the *Star Wars* one, but then within the theme melody there’s what they call cells, which is little pieces of that one melody that are then distributed across the piece so that each of them emerge in different areas,” says Paul Dario, who both directed and composed the score to the 2015 drama *Touched with Fire*.

“They become separate little themes to one overall song. You might say like four notes of the whole melody, which might be representative of a particular character or a particular movement or group,” he adds.

On the *Touched with Fire* score, Dario composed both a title theme song, as well as individual themes for the main characters played by actors Katie Holmes and Luke Kirby. The idea of these distinct character theme songs being associated with people, places or things also predates filmmaking, but remain present in films across all eras. In classical music this idea is called a leitmotif (German for ‘leading motive’), which is a melody, group of notes, rhythm or particular sound that frequently reoccurs during a piece to represent a character or place or to function as a metaphor.

These mini themes or motifs are often sprinkled within the main theme, or played during key moments, beginnings and ends of character’s arcs. An iconic example would be the “Force Theme” (also known as “Ben Kenobi’s theme”) played both during the sunset that begins Luke Skywalker’s arc in *Star Wars Episode IV*, as well as the sunset he dies in front of

in *Episode VIII*. Sometimes these character themes become the most memorable part of a film or widely associated as the film's theme song. For instance, what many would think of as the theme song to the *Harry Potter* franchise is actually called "Hedwig's Theme," named after the main character's pet owl.

The idea of leitmotifs and reoccurring melodies remain important and effective techniques in movie soundtracks that still feature original instrumental scores, like Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross's work on *The Social Network* (2010) and Jonny Greenwood's compositions in modern Paul Thomas Anderson films like *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *Phantom Thread* (2017). This is especially true in franchise filmmaking, where music can be as important in linking multiple episodic films as the visuals and cast. However, the opening overture themes—like the orchestral pieces mentioned earlier—aren't as common and at times can feel outdated. Despite movies on average getting longer, for the most part filmmakers have done away with the opening credit sequence and as a result, the overture like title theme song has lost its home. Even 21st century franchises like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which are full of reoccurring melodies, either have abandoned title theme sequences or limit them to the opening moments of only the first film in the series.

Williams has arguably created more iconic theme songs and film scores than anyone—his 51 Academy Award nominations and five wins are all music related and make him the second most nominated person ever, only behind Walt Disney. But his technique is difficult to replicate and possibly as a result, can feel like a throwback. The space a big orchestral theme song takes in the telling of the story gives off a very traditional vibe and in the wrong hands might take you out of the drama.

Composers Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard instead took a more minimalist approach with Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy*, opting to create tension and drama

with quieter hints of melody rather than obvious statements, as well as experimenting with instrumentation to create pads and walls of sound. “Why so Serious?” the character theme song that accompanies the Joker in the series 2008 second installment, *The Dark Knight*, incorporates the sounds of razorblades against violin strings to mimic the villain’s chaotic nature—contrasting the recognizable and militant “Imperial March” Williams composed for *Star Wars* villain Darth Vader.

However, Williams’ use of leitmotifs across the film franchises he’s worked on has created a template for modern film composers like Zimmer and Newton Howard to build their repeated musical motifs and ideas over several films, resulting in both character and plot development.

“There’s a whole theme that’s written and on purpose not in the movie,” Zimmer said in a 2006 [interview](#) with soundtrack.net of the title character’s theme music written for *Batman Begins*.

“We were basically betting that this movie might work out alright and there would be another one, so we wanted the character to develop. He hasn’t earned that theme yet,” Zimmer added.

The music in *The Dark Knight Trilogy* as a whole marked a key shift in franchise film scoring and a move away from instrumental theme songs. The title theme was the first idea to be abandoned, and though character themes are just as important and frequent, they pass by more quickly and subtly than those in a John Williams score. The trilogy also became synonymous with what is now known as Zimmer’s style of scoring, focusing more on these melodic cells played by a mix of traditional orchestral instruments and modern electric technology (Zimmer has been known to use synthesizers and electric cellos), as well as the use of percussion to build excitement. This has resulted in scores that walk the fine line

between music and sound design so closely that they could emphasize the magnitude of an explosion on screen better than the sound of the blast itself could.

“The actual *Dark Knight* theme, Batman’s call, is two notes and the Joker has the other two notes. You put them together and it makes a mess,” Zimmer said in a 2009 [interview](#) with KCRW.

Despite the trilogy’s music receiving a positive critical reception, which included *The Dark Knight* being awarded a Grammy for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media, it is hard to say whether people now or ever will be humming these two note hints at melody while walking down the street. However, Zimmer’s approach would influence franchise and genre film scores to come. A modern space film like 2019’s *Ad Astra* is more likely to come out of the Zimmer school of composition as displayed in 2014’s *Interstellar*, as opposed to the operatic style mentioned in Williams’ work.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, which has largely been criticized for its lack of memorable music, has taken elements of the Zimmer approach to scoring, opting to use its music to hint at motifs, rather than obviously showcase big themes. Part of this criticism stems from the fact that Marvel and the superhero genre are often labeled as this generation’s version of *Star Wars*, because of their widespread fandom, as well as being compared to westerns, because of their domination of both pop culture and the box office. This criticism isn’t totally fair, though, considering that the superhero music template created by *The Dark Knight Trilogy* doesn’t call for the same presence in a theme song that you might hear in a John Williams movie or even a western like the 1964 classic, *A Fistful of Dollars*. It also should be noted that though the scores created by composers like Alan Silvestri that makes up the MCU for the most part haven’t reached the critical acclaim of Zimmer’s work, they never take you out of the film or distract, which is the first rule in effective film scoring.

However, the attempts that the Marvel films do make at reviving the idea of an emblematic theme song ultimately have fallen flat, considering it has taken 23 MCU movies (and several memes) for *The Avengers* theme to be even slightly hummable. The two Marvel soundtracks that have stood out both critically and commercially among the bunch are *Black Panther* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, both of which feature original instrumental scores and themes that ultimately became sidebars to the pop-song versions of the soundtracks released at the same time.

In addition to Ludwig Göransson's score, in 2018 *Black Panther* featured an album of hip-hop songs curated by Kendrick Lamar that were "from and inspired by" the film. It was the MCU's first album to feature original music by pop artists, as Lamar and a collection of other hip hop and R&B musicians including SZA and The Weeknd wrote and performed every song, and as a result topped the Billboard 200 album charts and picked up multiple Grammy nominations, including Album of the Year. *Black Panther's* collection of music raises the question of whether a movie's theme song is actually the hit single most associated with the film, or the track actually meant to represent its title character, as Lamar and SZA's single "All the Stars," which appears during the film's end credits, has reached greater commercial popularity than Lamar's title track "Black Panther" or any themes present in the score.

The *Guardians of the Galaxy* model displayed in 2014 was unique in the sense that the soundtrack was a compilation of off-beat easy listening tunes that actually became the in-story playlist to the film's main character and an important plot point. It's long been common for films to release their theme songs or soundtracks (original or compiled) as promotional materials before their release to generate interest. But the *Guardians of the Galaxy* took its own spin on this model as it's one big self-promotional and expensive music video for a carefully crafted playlist of songs that people didn't know that they love. The

result was an immensely popular and successful film and album that became the first soundtrack without any new original songs to top the US Billboard album charts.

While *Guardians of the Galaxy* featured its share of memorable tunes, there wasn't a stand-alone piece of music that functioned as a theme song emblematic of the film or a specific character. However, compiled soundtracks have been challenging the way we think of theme songs in films at least since 1994, when Quentin Tarantino gave the world *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino is largely known as a pop culture fanatic and is obsessed with the concept of movie making. His films constantly reference movies that have inspired him, and he even often opts to feature an old-school opening credit sequence or montage. However, Tarantino is like a jazz musician paying tribute to the past but then ultimately discarding it completely.

In *Pulp Fiction*, instead of giving us an original composed or sung theme song during the opening credit crawl, he chooses Dick Dale's explosive surf guitar instrumental "Misirlou" to be the theme of his film, acting as an overture and hint at the surf rock sounds present later in the film and later associating itself with *Pulp Fiction* [references](#) across pop culture. Tarantino then breaks the rules again by changing the song midway through the credits to "Jungle Boogie" by Kool and the Gang.

While Tarantino didn't invent the soundtrack compilation, which gained popularity in the seventies with movies like *The Harder They Come* and *American Graffiti*, popularizing pre-existing music as theme songs and leitmotifs to embody his own films became part of his signature style of storytelling. One of the best examples of his use of pre-existing music is *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003), which featured the theme from the 2000 Japanese film *New Battles Without Honor and Humanity* as accompaniment to the now famous and copied scene where O-Ren Ishii (played by Lucy Liu) and her gang slow motion walk into an eventual showdown with The Bride (Uma Thurman).

“That has almost become the *Kill Bill* theme, or it’s people walking in slow motion badassery, it’s almost the theme to it,” Tarantino said of the theme he made his own, as described to [BBC Radio 1](#) in 2019.

“They used it in *Team America!* They used it for *Shrek 3*, and all the Disney princesses get together and they play the *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* theme as they walk triumphantly to kick everybody’s ass,” he added.

This does beg the question whether a director has a right to interpret someone else’s music to the point of making it a theme song in their own film. Tarantino has become known for it, though it isn’t a recent practice considering Stanley Kubrick got away with using pre-existing classical music in both *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *The Shining* (1980) to give the impression of a score and theme songs. However, Tarantino not only uses existing pop music, but existing scores and theme songs composed for other original films. Legendary soundtrack and theme song composer Ennio Morricone later criticized Tarantino over his use and placement of existing Morricone spaghetti western film themes over Tarantino’s own films like *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004) and *Django Unchained* (2012), though the two would eventually go on to work together on 2015’s *The Hateful Eight*, earning Morricone his first Oscar for Best Original Score.

The reality is that while a score is still an important part of the movie itself, it’s hard to say if it is going to sell records or theatre tickets. In the eighties, MTV offered a new avenue for films to cross promote their theme songs and soundtrack pop singles with music videos that included scenes from the movie, a few examples being Kenny Loggins’ “Danger Zone” from *Top Gun* (1986) and his chart-topping title track from *Footloose* (1984). Like a traditional theme song, “Danger Zone” is featured near the beginning of *Top Gun*, while the *Footloose* title theme is part of a famous dance sequence integral to the film’s story.

The song people leave the movie theatre singing, no matter how old or who wrote it, usually depends on the quality of the tune. And more often than not, the song will include a singer and lyrics. The soundtrack to 1997's *Titanic* sold 11 million copies, became the sixth best-selling soundtrack ever and the highest selling primarily scored album ever, because its theme song wasn't an instrumental—it was Celine Dion singing “My Heart Will Go On.” Even though this theme song was featured during the film's end credits, rather than as an overture or a key character moment, it captured the emotional tone of the film's climax and its music video featured footage from across the movie.

The idea of popular music artists contributing original songs to films is not a new trend, and neither is a pop song existing on a primarily scored soundtrack. It is a time-honored tradition that every James Bond film features a different pop artist singing a new theme song, often named after the film, from Shirley Bassey's 1964 theme from *Goldfinger* to modern Oscar winners like “Skyfall” by Adele and “Writing's On The Wall (from *Spectre*)” by Sam Smith. The Bond films are an interesting example, as the majority of them have also featured the instrumental “007 Theme” that has become the prototypical spy-movie soundtrack style template, though in the franchise's modern run these films have also began avoiding the flash of the theme and often incorporating it more subtly.

The Academy Awards introduced both Oscars for Best Original Score and Best Original Song in 1935, honoring films from the previous year. This distinction complicates our definition of a theme song even more, considering that the most prestigious film award still has never even as much as nominated something as classic as the theme from 1968's *Once Upon a Time in the West* or “The Raiders March” from *Indiana Jones* for Best Original Song. According to the official Academy Award [rules](#):

An original song consists of words and music, both of which are original and written specifically for the motion picture. There must be a clearly audible, intelligible, substantive rendition (not necessarily visually presented) of both lyric and melody, used in the body of the motion picture or as the first music cue in the end credits.

The award for Best Original Score also discounts the fact that a film's overall contributing musical package has evolved into something much more than just an instrumental piece of music. The same rules state:

A score shall not be eligible if:

- 1. It has been diluted by the use of pre-existing music, or*
- 2. It has been diminished in impact by the predominant use of songs or any music not composed specifically for the film by the submitting composer, or*
- 3. It has been assembled from the music of more than one composer.*

The award's strict parameters sometimes exclude predominantly instrumental soundtracks. *The Dark Knight* did not qualify for an Oscar for having too many composers, despite winning the Grammy Award equivalent. Even a theme song as iconic as the "Love Theme" from *The Godfather Trilogy* famously disqualified the film from Best Original Score contention because its composer, Nino Rota, had previously quoted part of it in the 1958 Italian film *Fortunella*. Despite being an award for music in film, the language stated in the Oscar's rules gives the impression that The Academy might not necessarily prioritize how music and theme songs actually function within movies.

The Grammy Award for Best Song Written for Visual Media has the same issue as the Oscar, though the Grammys have at least made an effort to recognize both scores and compilations, distinguishing them into separate categories. Like the Oscar, the Grammy's award for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media Album dictates that it is to be awarded to

a composer for an original scored composition. However, the Grammy's Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media Album, which was first awarded in 2000, is sort of an umbrella category for soundtracks that have multiple songs by different artists or cast members, regardless of whether they are original or not. The 2020 nominees include *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (all unoriginal songs from multiple artists that were on the radio in 1969), *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (features original songs) and *Rocketman* (literally a bunch of old Elton John songs).

Like awards, what goes into a soundtrack can be complicated, and both what is and what goes into a theme song can be equally as complicated, considering how we define theme songs is always changing. But what won't change is that the best theme songs will forever capture the life and legacy of a film in its time, whether we know it in the moment or not.

“In the initial stage of writing any of these things, one never imagines that they will be popular or even be around a week after they're done,” John Williams told [Variety](#) in 2016.

“Everything was written in the service of some film function. That's as far as my creative thinking would have gone. You never write a theme for a movie thinking, ‘this will live forever.’”