

“The Music from ‘Peter Gunn’”--Henry Mancini (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Mark A. Robinson (guest post)*



Henry Mancini

Henry Mancini (1924-1994) was the celebrated composer of a parade of song standards, particularly remembered for his work in television and film composition. Among his sparkling array of memorable melodies are the music for “The Pink Panther” films, the “Love Theme from ‘Romeo and Juliet’,” and his two Academy Award-winning collaborations with lyricist Johnny Mercer, “Moon River” for the 1961 film “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” and the title song for the 1962 feature “Days of Wine and Roses.”

Born Enrico Nicola Mancini in the Little Italy neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio, Henry Mancini was raised in West Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. Though his father wished his son to become a teacher, Mancini was inspired by the music of Hollywood, particularly that of the 1935 Cecil B. DeMille film “The Crusades.” This fascination saw him embark on a lifelong journey into composition. His first instrument of choice was the piccolo, but soon he drifted toward the piano, studying under Pittsburgh concert pianist and Stanley Theatre conductor Max Adkins. Upon graduating high school, Mancini matriculated at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, but quickly transferred to the Julliard School of Music, concentrating his studies in piano, orchestration, and composition. When America entered World War II, Mancini enlisted in the United States Army in 1943. Assigned to the 28th Air Force Band, he made many connections in the music industry that would serve him well in the post-war years. Ultimately, he was reassigned overseas to the 1306th Engineers Brigade in France and was among the soldiers that liberated the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp.

After the war, Henry Mancini’s music career began its meteoric rise. In 1946, he became a pianist and arranger for the Glenn Miller Orchestra. From there, Mancini found himself ensconced at Universal Studios’ music department where he wrote music for over one hundred motion pictures over a six-year span (1952-1958), including “The Creature from ‘The Black Lagoon,’” “It Came From Outer Space,” “The Glenn Miller Story” (his first Academy Award nomination), and the Orson Welles film noir “A Touch of Evil.” It was with “A Touch of Evil”

that Mancini would begin to explore that contemporary jazz-blues sound that would become a signature part of much of his future work, particularly the compositions he wrote for television.

Leaving Universal, Mancini set out to be an independent composer and arranger. One of the first big projects in this new phase of his career was writing the music for a new television series titled "Peter Gunn" (1958-1961). The show was created and produced by Blake Edwards with whom Mancini would enjoy an ongoing professional relationship in the decades to come. (Mancini would win an Academy Award for "Best Original Score" composing for Edward's 1982 musical film comedy "Victor/Victoria.")

"Peter Gunn" was to be an edgy crime drama about a private eye who investigates criminal activity in an unnamed waterfront metropolis. Mancini set about creating music that would provide the mood and atmosphere of the seedy locales of that world of criminal activity. Before "Peter Gunn" premiered, television theme songs were either composed in a grand, classical style for serious dramas and westerns, or as peppy, repetitive melodies reminiscent of commercial jingles for family comedies. With "Peter Gunn," Henry Mancini introduced contemporary jazz as an alternative, painting the world of the titular private eye with a darker, grittier sound. From the insistent pulsing of the tuba and the ominous thunder of the drums at the base of the arrangement, to the frantic throbs and urgent slides of the trombone, the smoky mood conveyed by the saxophones, and the startling high-pitched blats of the trumpet, "The 'Peter Gunn' Theme" evoked a palpable tension and conjured images of sinister goings-on, shadowy hallways, and dangerous criminals.

Audiences responded enthusiastically and the RCA/Victor LP "The Music from 'Peter Gunn'" did what very few television theme songs and scores have achieved: the album climbed to the top of the "Billboard" chart where it reached the #1 slot (staying there for ten weeks). It was the first television theme song to enjoy such a distinction. "The 'Peter Gunn' Theme" was nominated for an Emmy Award, and at the 1st Annual Grammy Awards ceremony, "The Music from 'Peter Gunn'" was awarded trophies for "Best Composing and Arranging" and "Album of the Year."

Mancini arranged the first single version of the song in 1959, released by Capitol Records and performed by trumpeter Ray Anthony. That incarnation reached number eight on the "Billboard" Hot 100 and number 12 on the R&B chart. It was not just in America, however, that "The 'Peter Gunn' Theme" and "The Music from 'Peter Gunn'" were enjoying accolades and frequent radio play. The song became an international sensation, with Duane Eddy's 1959 version of the song climbing to #6 in the United Kingdom. Even as late as 1986 the theme reappeared on the UK charts with the British techno-pop trio The Art Of Noise covering the song (and Eddy joining them on guitar). This version was a top ten hit around the world and it won the 1987 Grammy Award for "Best Rock Instrumental Performance."

In his autobiography "Did They Mention the Music?," Mancini talked about "The 'Peter Gunn' Theme" and what he had hoped to achieve. "The 'Peter Gunn' title theme actually derives more from rock and roll than from jazz. I used guitar and piano in unison, playing what is known in music as an ostinato, which means obstinate. It was sustained throughout the piece, giving it a sinister effect, with some frightened saxophone sounds and some shouting brass."

A pioneer and expert on all things musical, Mancini left a legacy of indelible melodies written for television and the movies that evoked both the mood and the moment, while setting up permanent residence in our ears and hearts. “The ‘Peter Gunn’ Theme” and the album “The Music from ‘Peter Gunn’” are among the myriad highlights of a prolific and dazzling career.

Mark Robinson is the author of the two-volume encyclopedia “The World of Musicals,” “The Disney Song Encyclopedia,” “The Encyclopedia of Television Theme Songs,” and “Sitcommentary: The Television Comedies That Changed America.” Robinson has written for “Playbill” magazine, “Lincoln Center,” “Broadway Records,” “Sorbet Magazine,” and ShowTickets.com. He maintains a theater and entertainment blog at markrobinsonwrites.com.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.