“Original Soundtrack from ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’”--Alex North, composer (1951)
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Essay by Jonathan Rhodes Lee (guest post)*

Miss Leigh is definitely at her greatest in this picture. She might be called a Scarlett O'Hara several generations later, with the fire of her character reduced to smoldering embers.... Pitiful she is, part of a dying, if not dead, aristocracy, intolerably pathetic.


So wrote the “Los Angeles Times” in its review of Warner Bros.’ 1951 film adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s “A Streetcar Named Desire.” This comparison between that film’s female lead, Blanche DuBois, and Scarlett O’Hara, the heroine of “Gone with the Wind” (1939), was virtually inevitable since Vivien Leigh portrayed both characters. The passage of some dozen years had changed the cinematic Southern belle. O’Hara had been brought to near ruin by the shifting socioeconomic forces around her, but she had persevered in the belief that “Home! Tara!” (her plantation house) would stand forever, an emblem of her region’s resiliency and her own unshakable philosophy that “tomorrow is another day.” When tomorrow came, however, it brought an inversion: in “Streetcar,” Tara was reconceived as Belle rêv e, a home lost irrevocably to creditors, and one whose very name (which means “beautiful dream”) implied delusions of grandeur for Southerners’ nostalgia at mid-century. Leigh’s characters, too, underwent drastic inversion: from brunette to blonde, from fiercely independent to hopelessly dependent “upon the kindness of strangers.”

The music for these films naturally reflected this change in mood; Max Steiner’s lushly romantic score for “Gone with the Wind” would hardly have fit “Streetcar’s” bleak aesthetic. Composer Alex North (1910–1991) therefore rose to the challenge of capturing Williams’s new, richly complex attitude toward the South. The music he provided explored dual registers, representing both DuBois’s fractured, nostalgic view of her region and the rest of the characters’ seedier
modern experience of inner-city New Orleans. The results proved both controversial and profoundly influential. “Streetcar” went down in history as one of very few films that have been censored (in this case by the then-powerful Catholic Legion of Decency) specifically because of its soundtrack; after production was finished, North was forced to replace a lengthy cue so that the film could reach audiences around the country. Despite this controversy (or perhaps because of it), North’s approach had staying power. “Streetcar” set the tone for Hollywood “Southerns” for the next decade; in fact, North himself scored no fewer than eight major studio Southerns between 1951 and 1961 (Figure 1), reigning—ironically, given both his name and his identity as a Philadelphian Jew—as the definitive voice of Hollywood’s Southern sound.

Figure 1: North’s Film Scores for Hollywood Southerns

- *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), based on the play by Tennessee Williams
- *The Member of the Wedding* (1953), based on the novel and play by Carson McCullers
- *The Rose Tattoo* (1955), based on the play by Tennessee Williams
- *Hot Spell* (1958), based on the play by Lonnie Coleman
- *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), based on William Faulkner’s *The Hamlet*
- *The Sound and the Fury* (1959), based on the novel by William Faulkner
- *Sanctuary* (1961), based on the novel by William Faulkner

“Streetcar” tells the complicated story of Blanche DuBois, a native of Oriel, Mississippi, who has made her way to New Orleans to stay with her sister, Stella Kowalski (Kim Hunter), after having lost *Belle réve* to the bank. Financial ruin is not DuBois’s only problem. We learn, as the film progresses, that her husband has earlier committed suicide; Williams’s script implies that the catalyst of his death was internal distress at being a gay man, married to a woman because of mid-century America’s social prohibitions against homosexuality. DuBois, in turn, has developed her own complicated psycho-sexual and legal problems in widowhood, running afoul of the law for seducing under-aged high school students in the Mississippi school where she taught. She presents the situation somewhat differently, saying that sought comfort in the “kindness of strangers,” thus putting her sin in the type of genteel terms that the character uses throughout the film. DuBois’s mannered personality stands in stark contrast with her sister’s New Orleans environs. DuBois finds Stella’s husband, Stanley (Marlon Brando), to be rough and uncouth, a Polish immigrant rather than a member of the landed Southern aristocracy of whom Blanche imagines herself to be a part. Stanley’s raw sexual magnetism and Stella’s passionate attraction to him both titillate and frighten DuBois. Stanley, in turn, finds DuBois’s affected mannerisms particularly irksome, and he accuses her of covering up her sins with fancy airs and a falsely elegant veneer. The resulting script is a stew of hatred, self-loathing, sexual tension, and tragedy.

For “Streetcar’s” main musical material, North incorporated jazz-inspired elements; he accomplishes this “jazzy” sound by relying on a small combo of rhythm section (piano, drums) and treble instruments for many cues, although the soundtrack does utilize a large studio orchestra even in much of the jazz-related music. Looking back 35 years later, the composer recalled, “I felt very strongly about the use of jazz.... I thought the play had a very sensuous... feeling, and to reflect that best would be by using elements of jazz.... I just felt that it was the right approach in keeping with the style of Tennessee Williams--the South. I couldn’t conceive of it in any other way.” The linkage that North makes here between sex, the South, and jazz
cropped up repeatedly in commentaries of the period about film Southerns and North’s music for them. The “New York Times” called the 1959 adaptation of Faulkner’s “The Sound and the Fury” as the “most recent Hollywood look-in on a decadent family in the South, boiling in sullen sex urges,” accompanied by a “jazzy musical score.”ii The same paper called “Sanctuary” (1961) the tale of a “jazz-age Southern girl” with “an interesting musical score that leans heavily on blues.”iii And a 1955 issue of the magazine “Film Music” praised the soundtrack to “The Rose Tattoo” for its “splendidly realistic jazz motif...exemplifying what must be the low-down aspect of the story.”iv

North’s best-known jazz cue in “Streetcar” was the censored music that he wrote for the famous staircase sequence. This scene is preceded by the close of a poker game, when Stanley, drunk and enraged at DuBois’s presence, takes out his frustration on Stella with his fists. Separated from her by his card-playing buddies, Stanley passes out as Stella and Blanche retreat to the flat owned by their upstairs neighbor. As Stanley slowly comes to his senses, North’s cue begins with a meandering solo clarinet line as an introduction, and Stanley utters Stella’s name in horrified realization of his actions. The cue proper, shown in Example 1, begins as Stanley poses a futile question to the absent wife: “Stella, where are ya?” Having tossed this query into open air, he begins pacing through the apartment, the cue matching his action with an A-minor descending tetrachord pattern in the rhythm section. The rocking material in the upper instruments employs a meandering, ever-shifting collection of intervals, broadening out to thirds and a diminished fourth by the seventh measure of the vamp pattern (m. 7 in Example 1). It is constantly in flux, expanding and contracting, identifiable more by its rhythmic profile than anything else.

Example 1. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, staircase sequence, original opening. Transcribed from short score, UCLA Library Special Collections PASC-M 17.

This instability underscores not only Stanley’s mental state but also an ever-developing scene, moving through various geographic spaces and character perspectives. As Stanley’s desperation grows, so does the pitch of his vocal scream, “Hey, Stella!”, which intermingles with North’s soundtrack to have a siren-call effect on the abused wife. A close-up shows Stella in a trance-like state, responding to the sound of her forlorn lover; she descends the stairs toward her husband, accompanied by the A-minor vamp, moving toward the resolution of the domestic drama: as Stella reaches Stanley and the couple embrace, the flute and saxophone begin playing
in parallel octaves, suggestively signaling both the end of their dispute and the sexual coupling that immediately follows the pair’s retreat to their bedroom.

This staircase music earned the condemnation of the Catholic Legion of Decency, which complained specifically about the film’s “lustful and carnal scoring,” assigning the preview cut of the film a “C” rating ("condemned") due to this scene’s combination of narrative, pictorial, and musical content. “Streetcar’s” director, Elia Kazan, reported in a 1951 interview with the “New York Times”:

This scene was carefully worked out, in an alternation of close and medium shots, to show Stella’s conflicting revulsion and attraction to her husband.... The censored version protects the audience from the close shots and substitutes a long shot of her descent. It also, by explicit instruction, omits a wonderful piece of music. It was explained to me that both the close shots and the music made the girl’s relation to her husband too carnal.

North subsequently replaced the “lustful” music with a different cue, and the film squeaked by the censors. Audiences subsequently didn’t see the scene as originally intended until 1993, when Warner Bros. released the “Original Director’s Version” to home viewers.

Despite the fame and power of this staircase sequence, “Streetcar’s” score is hardly a one-trick product, and it expresses more than sordid sexuality. Once again, North sensitively responded to dramatic elements; even the “Los Angeles Times’s” harsh dismissal of DuBois as representing “a dying, if not dead, aristocracy” hints that lurking behind her “intolerably pathetic” exterior was a remnant of an authentic older gentility. The “Times” review goes on to call DuBois “the quintessence of a woman’s tragedy, when she loses her proper and rightful place in the social scheme.” Kazan kept a notebook during his first stage production of “Streetcar” in 1947 that similarly characterizes DuBois:

*Her problem has to do with her tradition.* Her notion of what a woman should be...out of the tradition of the romantic ladies of the past.... Because this image of herself cannot be accomplished in reality, certainly not in the South of our day and time, it is her effort and practice to accomplish it in fantasy.... The more I work on Blanche, the less insane she seems. She is caught in a fatal inner contradiction, but in another society, she would work. In Stanley’s society, no!... The thing about the tradition in the nineteenth century was that it worked then. It made a woman...at that time *one with her society.* But today the tradition is an anachronism which simply does not function.”

DuBois for Kazan became a synecdoche for what he called the “South of our day and time,” her struggle not merely that of a sexually depraved and duplicitous woman, but the struggle of an ideal—a perhaps distorted and unrealistic ideal, but an ideal nevertheless—of civilization and culture standing against the brutality and materialism of mid-century America.

DuBois’s music is a cue called “Varsouviana,” a dance theme referred to by Tennessee Williams as “polka music...in a minor key faint with distance” and linked with DuBois’s mysterious past. We are introduced to it as a bit of metadiegetic music, running through Blanche’s mind
as she remembers the most painful moment of her younger days: the suicide of her husband, for which she blames herself. At the theme’s first occurrence, Stanley asks DuBois about her past relationship: “You were married once, weren’t ya?” This dialogue is subjected to echo effects that transport us into the metadiegetic world of Blanche’s dual perception of present and past. The Varsouviana begins here as if performed by a dance hall orchestra. The music that North produced (Example 2) was neither polka nor in the minor mode; it is a cheerful waltz with three eight-bar strains. In its introductory moment, the first eight bars sound very low in the mix, played by accordion and accompanying strings. The second strain achieves a more prominent level in the soundtrack as the dialogue ceases, and the melody rises into the upper strings. The music, like Stanley’s voice, has been altered in the recording process, provided with a reverberance that might be read alternately as the sound of an orchestra in a large dance room or as the uncomfortable fantasy world dominating DuBois’s mental space. DuBois, well aware of the persistence of this painful past into the present, places her hands over her ears to shield herself from the remembered sound of the gunshot that brought her husband’s death, which interrupts the ghostly Varsouviana at the close of its third strain.

Example 2. A Streetcar Named Desire, “Varsouviana” cue. Transcribed from short score, UCLA Library Special Collections PASC-M 17

If the initial presentation of the Varsouviana represents a collision of past and present within DuBois’s mind, then its subsequent appearance in a cue labeled by North as “Collector Scene” in his pre-orchestration score even more vividly demonstrates how the composer aimed to evoke the intrusion of this shadowy fantasy into physical reality (Example 3a). North created a shimmering, otherworldly quality (without the need of the electronic sonic alteration used in the earlier Varsouviana cue) by employing a high violin line floating over a unique orchestration: English horn, French horn, celesta, separate cello parts, and middle strings, all supported by repetitious low pedal tones provided by the harp and bottom strings. He also generates a profoundly unsettling effect through sustained tone clusters. Occasional, fragmented evocations of the Varsouviana cut through this underscoring, each time keyed to important dramatic developments. The first instance underscores the ringing of the Kowalski’s doorbell, as a young male representative from a New Orleans newspaper, “The Evening Star,” visits to collect a subscription fee. North marked the second instance of the Varsouviana fragment (mm. 12–13) “Blanche looks toward him”; the theme and the collector are now linked—a curious pairing for the moment, but one that will receive dramatic explanation as DuBois’s attitude toward the salesman is unveiled.

The climax of the sequence, both in terms of drama and underscoring, comes in the final strain of the Varsouviana (Example 3b, mm. 44–end). This was the moment at the Varsouviana’s introduction, discussed above, when DuBois’s imagined gunshot interrupted the cue. In the “Collector Scene,” however, DuBois kisses the young man, “softly, and sweetly” on his mouth.
(as she says), and the Varsouviana swells into prominence. The cellos now offer a full-throated presentation of the Varsouviana’s final strain, a defiant answer to the uneasy dissonance of the cue’s opening measures. For one brief moment of seemingly unabashed pleasure, Blanche’s memory of her young husband moves from death and tragedy to life and sensuality; it is a hint of the moments that Blanche must have shared with the string of young boys whom she scandalously seduced in Mississippi, providing escape from mental distress--past made present, dream into physical sensation.

Alex North thus gave two contrasting poles of musical language to “Streetcar.” His score accomplishes much more than being merely “sexy” or “jazzy”; it effectively captures this script’s push and pull between nostalgic dreams and harsh reality. By creating this musical underscoring, North showed himself to be deeply aware of “Streetcar’s” thematicization of conflicts between the Old and New South that characterized much midcentury literature by Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, and other authors whose writings were adapted onto celluloid. In 1959, producer Jerry Wald praised North for the “extraordinary feeling for the atmosphere of the modern South” that he had accomplished throughout the decade. That “feeling” got its first showcasing in “Streetcar,” a controversial film with a controversial soundtrack, but one that nevertheless ensured North’s role creating the sound of Hollywood’s version of the South for a decade to come.

Example 3: A Streetcar Named Desire, “Collector Scene” cue. Transcribed from short score, UCLA Library Special Collections PASC-M 17. A (left): mm. 11–18; B (right): mm. 44–end.
Jonathan Rhodes Lee is a musicologist with interests in both 18th-century topics (particularly the works of George Frideric Handel) and film music. He has published widely, including articles in the “Journal of Musicology,” “Cambridge Opera Journal,” “Eighteenth-Century Music, Music and Letters”, and with A-R Editions. His book, “Film Music in the Sound Era: A Research and Information Guide,” appeared in 2020. Lee is currently Assistant Professor of Musicology and director of the Arnold Shaw Popular Music Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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


Letter from Vizzard to Joseph Breen, MPAA PCA records, AMPAS, as quoted in Annette Davison, *Alex North’s A Streetcar Named Desire: A Film Score Guide*, Scarecrow Film Score Guides (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009). Davison discusses the censorship issues in detail on 68–72.


North’s version is derived, Davison points out, from the popular tune “Put Your Little Foot [Right There],” the same source that had been used for Kazan’s original stage production (Davison, *Alex North’s A Streetcar Named Desire: A Film Score Guide*, 83).


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