

EXTRA  
EXTRA!

HEAR ALL  
ABOUT IT!



### The New Town Crier: music's role in the broadcast experience. Story by ... Someone.

It is 1914, and the mistakeable cadence of military drums and fanfare of brass announce the arrival of the war news. On the screen embellished with fold, the machinery of war goes about its timeless business, the drama of each moment driven home by the rhythms and melodies familiar from previous reports. This is the news of the First World War, courtesy of the Pathe Gazette biweekly newsreel.

The live music for the newsreel varied from theater - sometimes a solo pianist, sometimes an organist playing Foto-player Style 50, a 21-foot-long music machine capable of simulating everything from a 20-piece band to a pistol shot, horses hoves, and crackling flames. In big-city movie places, the newsreels might be accompanied by symphony orchestras of up to 80 players. The actual notes vary as well, since the distributors

didn't provide scores, and each theater's musical director had to find popular songs or classical music appropriate to each news story.

To ease this burden, publishers offered digests of music categorized by dramatic need, such as the *Sam Fox Moving Picture Music, Volume 1* (1913, compiled by J. S. Zamecnik, a student of Dvorak's). As the newsreel played, the musicians could simply turn to page 11 for "War" music (*Sam Fox* offers three kinds) or page 17 for "Hurry" music (four varieties).

The town crier is an obvious early example of the use of music in news broadcasting. His handbell served both to gather an audience and to focus its attention, and suppose the difference in tone and ringing pattern between the famous bell of Antonio Pucci and that of any other fourteenth century crier served what we might now call a "branding" function.

Written news was often the basis for the town crier's announcements, and its market value was established in Venice in the sixteenth century when the government sponsored readings of *avvisi* for the general public, price of admission one *gazeta*. (Hence the word "gazette"). It's a good bet that the news reflected well on the Venetian Republic and somewhat less well on its enemies, the Turks.

In the 1930s, newsreels became "talkies" and began to include prerecorded music, putting many pianists and organists out of work but creating jobs for composers who could write music for the films. When the newsreel industry finally died in the late fifties, many of its foot soldiers joined camp of its killer, television.

Like radio, television was subject to more government regulation that film - the assumption being that when broadcasters use a public resource (the electromagnetic spectrum), they have an obligation to the public. As early as 1941, both the Federal Communications Commission and the National Association of Broadcasters made it clear that radio and television newscasts could not be "editorial." Perhaps as a result, there was much less music in television news than in newsreels.

The first nightly newscast was that of Douglas Edwards on CBS-TV in 1948, but most stations thought news unattractive to their audiences. It was only in 1963 that CBS and NBC sensed enough interest to expand newscast from fifteen to thirty minutes, and President Kennedy's assassination that year established the role of network news as a place of common comfort, as well as information for the country.

If music was present at all, it was only before and after the newscast, and it served the same branding func-

tion as theme songs did on serials and sitcoms. Because Americans' televisions remained on even when they weren't watching, music once again served to gather the audience.

The sixties brought a growing sense of civic responsibility among journalists who were discovering that much of the government's information about the Vietnam War was false. By 1968, CBS News was airing special reports like "The Vietcong" and "Hanoi," which are startling to watch today. There is no music anywhere in these pieces, and since the footage was largely shot without sound, there is a pervasive sense of quiet and, at least to someone listening in 2004, what must be called seriousness.

“Converted practice has made an anchor of background music, such that it dictates what the viewers' response to the images ought to be. Remove it from a scene whose emotional content is not explicit and you risk confronting the audience with an image they might fail to interpret.”

Claudia Gorbman,  
*Unheard Melodies Narrative Film Music*

Poststructuralist literary theory holds that meaning of the written word is diffused, forever contingent on a web of constantly shifting contexts. How much more so for a filmed image? And how much more for still music?

Lalo Schifirin may have scored the tarring of a dusty road in *Cool Hand Luke*, but that didn't prevent ABC from appropriating the music to announce its evening news. To the folks at ABC, the piece wasn't about work gangs or the failure to communicate; it was about breathless urgency. But there's no way to know what it meant to the audience.

As it happens, the *Cool Hand Luke* theme par-took - unintentionally, I'm sure - of the number-one cliché in news music: the rhythm of the teletype. Although this cliché is kept alive by news organizations around the globe, most composers make a serious effort to get as far away from it as possible. The teletype rhythm does have one advantage over most music: much less semantic baggage - it's not in a major or a minor key, and it has no melody that would color the broadcast. As we entered the age of branding, however, it also had one short coming: it could not be copyrighted. It is the simple sound of a machine doing its job.

(Story continued on page 48)