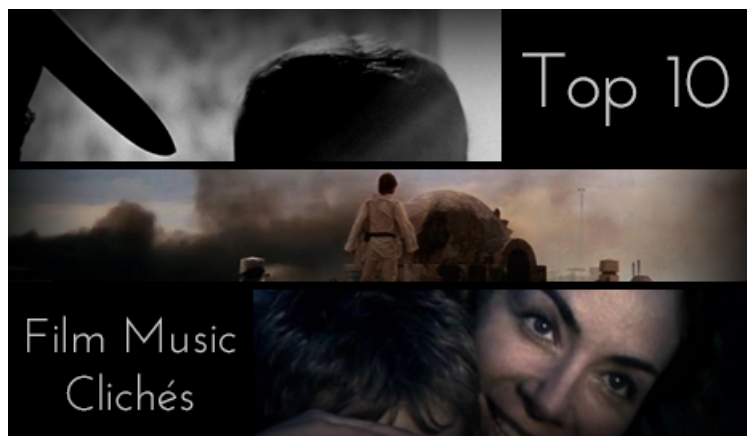


## Top 10 Film Music Cliches, Part 2

From the **Conspirators Theme** to **Sexy Saxophone**, the most famous and infamous tricks of the trade.

By Erik Heine



Continued from [Part 1...](#)

### The “Conspirators Theme”

(Selected Examples)

*JFK* (1991) “The Conspirators”—John Williams  
*Under Siege* (1992) “[The Takeover](#)” and “[The Broadway Shootout](#)”—Gary Chang  
*Sneakers* (1992) “[The Hand-Off](#)”—James Horner  
*Jurassic Park* (1993) “Dennis Steals the Embryo”—John Williams  
*The Firm* (1993) “Mud Island Chase”—Dave Grusin  
*The Usual Suspects* (1995) “New York’s Finest”—John Ottman  
*Volcano* (1997) “Miracle Mile”—Alan Silvestri  
*Alias* (2002) Season 2: “Syd’s Best Alias Yet”—Michael Giacchino

In the 1990s, audiences learned that if a conspiracy was afoot, it would be accompanied by a time-keeping woodblock or other similar sound, compound meter, and a low-register melody that would have been beyond the realm of a single scale, and even nearing atonality. The [introduction](#) of the “**Conspirators Theme**” comes courtesy of John Williams’ score for Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, where the answer is “a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma,” and famously coincides with this memorable scene.

When terrorists take over a navy ship, only Steven Seagal, playing a cook, can stop them. It may be Seagal’s best (reviewed) film, but composer Gary Chang should have listed John Williams as a second composer on the score, because the Conspirators Theme is featured so prominently throughout. The material is used in no fewer than three separate cues.

*Sneakers* is a spy/heist/hacking film, where everyone is pitted against each other, and actual agencies that deal with conspiracies, such as the NSA and CIA, have a presence in the story. In addition to its use in the selected example above, the Conspirators Theme appears in the cue “Too Many Secrets,” which is a phrase used in the film, an anagram of “Setec Astronomy.”

Williams revisited his own theme two years later in *Jurassic Park*, when Dennis Nedry steals the dinosaur embryos. This use [isn't identical](#), but it’s one of the more famous instances where John Williams imitates John Williams.

Near the end of *The Firm*, [the material plays](#) as the “Nordic Man” chases Mitch through Mud Island, with Mitch on the monorail. The Nordic Man seeks to kill Mitch to prevent him from revealing secrets regarding the law firm to the FBI.

The cue “[New York’s Finest](#)” from *The Usual Suspects* features off-duty cops providing a “taxi service” for smugglers from various airports in the NYC area. The

kicker in this scene is that the titular suspects hold up the “taxi service,” and set up the cops to be busted by Internal Affairs, one of the few places where the “conspirators” receive their comeuppance.



The use of the Conspirators Theme in *Volcano* is [odd](#) in that the wood block is absent, replaced by pizzicato strings, and the volcano is not expressly conspiring against anyone. This is a disaster film, not a spy/thriller/drama, and the change in orchestration reflects that genre shift.

## The “Loss” Gesture

(Selected Examples)

*Cocoon* (1985) “First Tears”—James Horner

*Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) “Peggy Sue’s Homecoming”—John Barry

*Hook* (1991) “Farewell Neverland”—John Williams

*Alive* (1993) “Alberto”—James Newton Howard

*X-Men 3: The Last Stand* (2006) “[X Funeral](#)”—John Powell

*Lost* (2004-2010) “SS Lost-tanic” & “Moving On” (among dozens of others)—Michael Giacchino

*Up* (2012) “Stuff We Did”—Michael Giacchino

*The Martian* (2015) “I’ve Got Him”—Harry Gregson-Williams

The “**Loss Gesture**” is an oscillation of two chords, functionally Roman numerals I and iii (e.g., C major and e minor), that provide a sense of longing, loss and heartbreak. The iii chord is rarely used in common-practice harmony (1700-1900), so its pervasive appearance in this gesture is, perhaps, unexpected. This gesture was identified and labeled by film music theorist Scott Murphy, and has been firmly entrenched in Hollywood since the mid-1980s. Murphy made a relatively comprehensive list in a 2014 article, published in *Music Theory Spectrum*.

One of the first examples of the Loss Gesture occurs in *Cocoon*. It appears initially in a cue titled “A Relapse,” where Hume Cronyn’s character learns his cancer has come back, following his inability to return to the magical pool in which the aliens are reviving their friends. The second occurrence is in “[First Tears](#),” where Brian Dennehy’s character, an alien, cries for the first time, as he realizes the pool’s healing properties have been fully sapped by those at the retirement community. *Cocoon* is an early James Horner score, and one of his standouts from the ’80s.



John Barry used the gesture the following year in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, a film about Peggy Sue, recently separated from her high school sweetheart, on the cusp of her 25th high school reunion, when she is magically transported back to her high school days. Essentially, she is trying to reconcile the loss that she feels at her husband's infidelity, and the Loss Gesture is [featured throughout](#) Barry's score.

As Peter leaves Neverland with his children, John Williams uses the Loss Gesture to represent [his hesitation at going](#), having found his inner Pan once more. But Peter knows he must return his children to the real world, and can still take a part of Neverland with him.

The character of Alberto is on the verge of dying near the end of *Alive*. James Newton Howard's score emphasizes this through repetitions of the first part of the main theme, repeating the Loss Gesture [almost for the entirety of the cue](#), varying only the orchestration.

Michael Giacchino is the modern-day master of the Loss Gesture. It is the foundation for one of the primary themes heard throughout the television series *Lost*, and is featured in nearly every one of his film scores, including *Rogue One*. Two prime examples both come from Season 6 of *Lost*: The first is for the [drowning scene](#) of Sun and Jin, whose bond and marriage only grew deeper throughout the series. The second is the [final cue used in the series](#), as the survivors all are transported into the next life together, their shared experience connecting them.

In "[Stuff We Did](#)" from *Up*, Carl Fredricksen is looking through the memory book made by his wife, Ellie, and is inclined to give up and die in just a few moments. He will quickly find the resolve he needs to continue.

One of the more unusual instances of the Loss Gesture comes at the end of *The Martian*. This [particular use](#) is odd because it plays when Mark Watney has actually been saved by his crew, and is in the process of being pulled back to the ship. People around Earth are celebrating, yet the Loss Gesture is heard.

## The "Edward Scissorhands Bittersweet Theme"

(Selected Examples)

*Edward Scissorhands* (1990) "Ice Dance" and "The Grand Finale"—Danny Elfman  
*Pleasantville* (1995) "Real Rain" & "Mural"—Randy Newman  
*Casper* (1995) "[Casper's Lullaby](#)"—James Horner  
*Sphere* (1998) "The Gift"—Elliot Goldenthal  
*The Polar Express* (2004) "Opening Titles"—Alan Silvestri  
*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2017) "[Newt Says Goodbye to Tina](#)"—James Newton Howard  
*Welcome to Marwen* (2018) "Saved"—Alan Silvestri

The "**Bittersweet Theme**" from *Edward Scissorhands* is a specific subcategory of the Loss Gesture, due to its orchestration (notably wordless choir and high-

register pitched percussion) and continuation into a Roman numeral progression that is often I-iii-IV-I. It also tends to be used in films that emphasize fantasy, rather than the more grounded “reality” films that use the more basic Loss Gesture. The initial variant appears in Elfman’s score for *Edward Scissorhands*, first in “[Ice Dance,](#)” and then at the end of the movie, in “[The Grand Finale.](#)” The appearance in the latter is more fully orchestrated, as emotions have deepened over the course of the picture.



In *Pleasantville*, two teens are pulled into the perfect world of an old ’50s-style television show, but end up demonstrating that “perfect” is not the way to live life. Randy Newman uses the Bittersweet Theme in two separate cues, one [when it rains for the first time](#) in Pleasantville, and the other, accompanying an elaborate [full-color mural](#).

The titular sphere in *Sphere* is in fact not of the Earth, and as such, the [wordless choir variant](#) makes sense in this film. The Bittersweet Theme appears twice within this cue, separated by only 15 seconds.

Alan Silvestri has made significant use of the *Edward Scissorhands* Bittersweet Theme over the years, including the [opening](#) of the similarly snowy *The Polar Express*, and, most recently, in *Welcome to Marwen*. Besides being a Christmas film, *The Polar Express* is also something of a fantasy, and is animated, accentuating the wondrous elements of the story. *Welcome to Marwen* largely takes place in a fantasy world as well—the mind of the protagonist, played by Steve Carell. Stop-motion animation is used to clearly differentiate this imagined world from the real one, where the character suffers from PTSD after being violently physically assaulted. The Bittersweet Theme is used in the cues “Finally Got it Right” and “[Saved.](#)”

## The “Deep Blue Sea” Theme

(Selected Examples)

*Armageddon* (1998) “Long Distance Goodbye/Landing”—Trevor Rabin  
*Deep Blue Sea* (1999) “Aftermath”—Trevor Rabin  
*Shrek* (2001) “Escape From the Dragon”—Harry Gregson-Williams, John Powell  
*Children of Dune* (2003) “Summon the Worms”—Brian Tyler  
*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) “Only the Beginning of the Adventure”—Harry Gregson-Williams  
*Transformers* (2007) “Arrival to Earth”—Steve Jablonsky  
*The Contender* (2005-2009) “Opening Theme”—Hans Zimmer  
*Gravity* (2013) “Shenzou”—Steven Price

The “**Deep Blue Sea**” Theme is an anthemic tune that tends to come from composers associated with Remote Control Productions, Hans Zimmer’s studio. It’s a vaguely “inspirational” theme, and while Zimmer himself didn’t create it, he has used it, and it appears to stem from his “Teutonic Themes” heard in scores such as *The Lion King* and *Crimson Tide*. The idea often appears in blockbuster/spectacle

films, and in some ways, is one of the defining sounds of the “Zimmer/Remote Control style.” *FSMO* Executive Editor Jon Kaplan has discussed the “Deep Blue Sea” Theme at length [in a podcast](#), and is the expert on the subject. All the composers on the above list except for Brian Tyler are associated with Remote Control.



The “Deep Blue Sea” Theme gets its name from its prominent, codified usage in *Deep Blue Sea*. It occurs [near the film’s end](#), once the “smart sharks” have been defeated. While this is the original finished product, it can be traced to an earlier theme in *Armageddon*, used at [the film’s conclusion](#). I suspect that it also appears in Rabin’s score for *Remember the Titans*, and other inspirational films/moments, but a little Rabin goes a long way.

*Shrek* is an animated film, and the title character can perform feats that defy science and gravity. The cue [“Escape From the Dragon”](#) demonstrates the effort through which he must go to escape, as well as the fact that he actually will, based on the presence of the Deep Blue Sea Theme.

The first film in what was presumed to be the full *Narnia* series was scored by Harry Gregson-Williams. The early books in C. S. Lewis’ chronicle were the ones that contained the greatest amount of action, and that action, along with fantasy elements, were foregrounded in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Gregson-Williams’ score [uses the inspirational Deep Blue Sea theme](#) to get the audience’s attention and to let us know the children will be safe.

The full ensemble of Autobots don’t appear onscreen until the halfway point in *Transformers*, accompanied by the cue [“Arrival to Earth.”](#) It’s a vaguely motivational moment in the film, and gives the audience a reason to get excited; the Autobots gather reinforcements to battle against the Decepticons.

Like many scoring clichés, this one migrates from film to television. Zimmer composed the theme to the reality show/boxing competition *The Contender*, initially hosted by Sylvester Stallone and Sugar Ray Leonard. Once again, the Deep Blue Sea theme, with its [minor-mode gravitas and inspirational chord progression](#), is present, giving the impression that any one of the unknown contestants could win and become an international boxing champion. Like most reality shows, things rarely work out that way.

Brian Tyler’s score for the television miniseries *Children of Dune*, based on three books in Frank Herbert’s series, is considered to be one of the best scores of his career. It was used in trailers quite often, as the thematic material is not specifically tethered to iconic characters. The Deep Blue Sea Theme occurs in one of the early cues, [“Summon the Worms,”](#) and sounds multiple times within it.

Although Steven Price never officially worked at Remote Control, he was the music editor on *Batman Begins* and was around Zimmer and James Newton Howard, and worked with the Gregson-Williams brothers early in his career. The score for *Gravity* doesn’t exactly feature the Deep Blue Sea theme, but it’s [certainly close](#), particularly because of the repetitive nature of some of the harmonic progressions.

I would call this example a variation on the Deep Blue Sea theme because the harmonies are not exactly the same, but Price is clearly extracting the same emotional response from the audience. In “Shenzou,” near the film’s conclusion, Sandra Bullock’s character is crashing to Earth in a Chinese space station.

## Sexy Saxophone

(Selected Examples)

*Mickey One* (1965) “Mickey’s Theme”—Eddie Sauter, Stan Getz  
*In Like Flint* (1967) “Westward Ho-o-o”—Jerry Goldsmith  
*On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (1969) “Bond Meets the Girls”—John Barry  
*Farewell My Lovely* (1975) “To Mrs. Florian’s/Car-nal Knowledge/I Am Curious”—David Shire  
*Body Heat* (1981) “Main Title” & “I’m Weak”—John Barry  
*Lethal Weapon* (1987) “Meeting Martin Riggs/Roger’s Daughter” among many others—(Michael Kamen)  
*The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!* (1988) “Meet Miss Spencer & “The Seduction”—Ira Newborn  
*Shoot to Kill* (1988) “[End Titles](#)”—John Scott  
*Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1989) “Jessica’s Theme” (aka “I’m a Pawn”) & “[End Credits](#)”—Alan Silvestri  
*Hard to Kill* (1990) “Just Passing By”—David Michael Frank  
*Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1995) “Fembot”—George S. Clinton

When we think of “**Sexy Saxophone**,” we typically think of the femme fatale, in the office of a private detective in a 1940s/50s noir film. This conception is not actually valid. In those noir films, a trumpet was the typical instrument used, with saxophone not being introduced in this context until the mid ’60s. This cliché has taken a strong hold with its meaning, to the point where it (almost) sounds ridiculous when used seriously. The sultry sound of the saxophone makes its use in scenes of physical intimacy common, but because it is such a cliché, nowadays it almost exclusively appears in comedies and parodies.



One of the earliest uses of sexy saxophone is in the film *Mickey One*, starring Warren Beatty. In the movie, Beatty’s character is a stand-up comic who takes an assumed name to avoid retribution from the mob. Stan Getz, the famed jazz saxophonist, is credited as a co-composer of the score, and his playing on “[Mickey’s Theme](#)” presents the sexy/noir element in the film.

In addition to femme fatale/noir films, sexy saxophone typically appears in spy movies, both serious and comedic, to accompany the onscreen presence of women. A quintessential example from the James Bond franchise comes from *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*; the cue title leaves nothing unexpected: “[Bond Meets the Girls](#).” In parody films, the saxophone is hyper-accentuated. For example, in *In Like Flint*, a movie with the tagline “Where the bad guys...are girls,” the suave spy Derek Flint must not only resist the feminine wiles of the “bad girls,” but must

actually thwart their villainous plot. When the “bad girls” are [at their most seductive](#) is where the sexy saxophone appears. Something similar occurs in *Austin Powers*, when [Austin encounters the Fembots](#). In a parody-of-a-parody moment, Austin finds *In Like Flint* on television and comments that it’s his favorite film, so the Fembot parody moment is also somewhat of an homage to *Flint*.

*Farewell, My Lovely*, a noir film starring Robert Mitchum as private investigator Phillip Marlowe, is the type of movie from where the cliché of the woman in the P.I.’s office stems. In this case, David Shire’s music serves as both an indicator of noir and of seduction, as in the cue “[Car-nal Knowledge](#).”

Some instances of sexy saxophone are used for just that: seduction and sex. John Barry’s score for *Body Heat* is a sultry mystery, clearly stated from the moment the “[Main Title](#)” begins, and that tone continues throughout the entire film, notably in the cue, “[I’m Weak](#).”

Seduction can be parodied, and is in the comedy *The Naked Gun*, where the moment Lt. Frank Drebin lays eyes on Jane Spencer, [the saxophone sounds](#). Later, in their [seduction scene](#), the saxophone is far over the top of a noir/mystery/drama, absurd to the point of hilarity. Likewise, in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, the music for Jessica Rabbit (“I’m not bad. I’m just drawn that way.”), an animated person, is [hyper-sexualized](#) through the presence of the saxophone. It is her music, and she owns it in a way most female characters don’t.

In the *Lethal Weapon* franchise, the saxophone serves more as a leitmotivic instrument for [Roger Murtaugh](#) and his family than as an indicator of sexiness and seduction. The saxophone, belonging to jazz, is juxtaposed with the electric guitar, a rock instrument, which belongs to Martin Riggs. The idea is that the guitar is more raw, chaotic and unpredictable than the saxophone; despite its improv underpinnings, jazz has a certain set of formal structures, while rock’s structures can be less codified and predictable. The two instruments also play on the races of the characters: jazz for African-American and rock for Caucasian. The performers on the instruments, David Sanborn and Eric Clapton, respectively, contributed so much with their solos that they were given co-composing credits beginning with the second film in the series.



And that brings us to the Steven Seagal film, *Hard to Kill*, when a cliché is used unironically, and sounds ridiculous because of its clearly intended function. The saxophone in this movie almost sounds like [something from late-night Cinemax films](#), which is why it is both ineffective and hilarious. It’s the perfect case of a cliché that had the right intentions and comes across as hackneyed and silly, a wonderful example on which to end this survey of film music clichés.

—FSMO

*So many clichés exist in film music, both beyond the categories listed here, and additional instances within them. Some examples of other categories include “exotic” scales for geographic locations other than North America or Western Europe, and whole-tone scales for dream sequences and other cartoon-like moments.*

*What are some of your favorite clichés? Share them in the comments section below. If you have private thoughts for me, shout at me at: [erikjheine@gmail.com](mailto:erikjheine@gmail.com).*