CHAPTER 23

Out in the Real World

The most important thing is a love for films,
and a fascination, a desire, a love, and feel for music.
—Mark Snow

There comes a point when a dream can become a reality. The musician who has dreamt about working as a film composer is ready to live that dream when he has the appropriate composition and orchestration skills, has mastered dramatic synchronization, knows some basic sequencing, and above all, is ready to start making money writing music for movies. The questions are: How to get started? Where is the work? What materials are needed? Who should I call? Am I good enough? On and on these questions go, with many variations on these themes.

There is no one answer, there is no one best route to film composing success and stardom. Every successful composer has a different story to tell. They all involve some combination of hard work, persistence, preparation, and sheer luck. Maybe the 347th door you knock on will be the one. You never know when a director will hear your New Age album and decide that your music is perfect for his film. You could knock on every door in Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and Century City for years, only to get into a fender-bender with a director who is looking for a composer. Maybe your charm and good looks will open many doors, even if your writing skills are minimal. So the best thing a composer can do is write a lot, get better at writing, be prepared, and be persistent.

There are hundreds of aspiring film composers living in Los Angeles right now, hoping to catch that big break. So how can you hope to compete? It is part luck, and part self-effort. Mark Snow puts the perseverance angle well:

You knock on every door and you're merciless, you keep persevering like crazy and pray, and 1 out of 10 guys who come to town make it. I don't know, maybe 1 out of 100. Maybe 1 out of 4.

And Mark Isham talks about luck:

I never set out to be a film composer. I just happened to write music and other people said, "God, this would be great for film." And then somebody actually said, "I want you to do it for a film." And all of a sudden I had another career.

There are many ways to get started in the film-composing business. You can move to Los Angeles and try to swim with the big boys. Or you can go to a smaller town, get some smaller projects, and gain experience and credibility. Either way, there are two things that must happen while you are getting started: first, you need to be actively involved in making or writing music on a regular basis, and second, you need to have your act together in terms of presenting yourself and your music. Take the time to organize your materials in a professional way. Remember that this is a business based on person-to-person relationships, and your demo, résumé, or bio could be the first step of this relationship. Create a logo and a company name, get stationery and business cards, make sure your answering machine is warm and welcoming—not goofy sounding. When you go to meetings, be well dressed, arrive on time, and be confident. In short, create an aura about yourself that says to a producer or director, "This person has his act together, and I'd like to work with him."

Demos

The first thing you must have is a professionally recorded audio demo with a variety of your music on it. This is commonly submitted on either cassette tape or CD. In either format, choose cues that are recorded and played well. Remember that non-musicians might hear an out-of-tune trumpet but not know what is wrong and think it is something inherent in the music. Then it becomes your fault, and in their mind you do not write good music. Or they could hear a poor quality recording of an ingenious piece, and not be able to hear through the bad sound.

Also, choose pieces that are film-like in nature. Cues from film projects you have already worked on are best. Excerpts from classical concert pieces are not recommended because they do not usually sound like film music, especially chamber groups. A chamber group is always a chamber group, and is a very specific sound in the ears of most people. Some films use chamber groups, but not many.

Songs are not considered film scores. Do not submit songs on a film-scoring demo except: (1) If you know the project is looking for songs, and (2) The songs submitted are in addition to other music you are submitting.

If you are sending in a demo for a specific project, as opposed to a more general demo, then choose cues that you think are in the ballpark of what the director is seeking. After you have presented these kinds of cues, then you might add one or two that show another side of what you can do.

Composers have gone to various lengths to make great demos. Some have hired small orchestras to the tune of several thousand dollars in order to make the best presentation. There are demo orchestras that you can pay by the hour in Los Angeles and in Europe. The key is to make it sound as good as possible. This is the audio representation of who you are musically, so you must make it shine.

Cassettes

Generally, if you are making a cassette demo, it should be about seven to ten minutes long with excerpts from various cues you have done. Remember that you are showing a sample of your work, and you want to include as many different type of cues as possible. Therefore, edit and keep it short! If a director or producer is interested, then he will ask for more material down the line, but make the first presentation short and sweet. Try to include as much material as possible that is thematic in nature, as opposed to cues that are more like underscore

and less melodic. Cues with catchy thematic material are generally more interesting than cues that were originally conceived as underscore. Make the space between selections brief, and as smooth as possible. Try to create the master on ProTools or similar software. Editing on a home cassette dubbing deck is not recommended as it creates audible and annoying pops and clicks between selections, and there is usually no way to fade in and out.

A way to show more than one aspect of your skills is to use both sides of the tape. For example, Side A could be "Orchestral Film Cues," and Side B could be "Songs." Or side B could be "Electronic Music Cues.'"

Purchase cassettes in bulk with no printed labels already on them. Make the labels for the individual cassettes and design the J-cards (the cards that go in the cassette box) on the computer, or have a cassette duplication house print them for you. A logo of your name or company can look impressive, but if you don't have one, any nice font will do. DO NOT submit demos with cassettes bought at a record store with your contact info and the titles of the selections hand-printed. This would make you seem unprofessional when compared to the many tapes that have laser-printed labels.

Finally, make sure your contact information—phone number, address, or e-mail—is on every cassette and every J-card. This way, if those items get separated, the person at the other end will always know where to find you.

CDs

With the technology becoming more affordable and more user friendly, homemade CDs are now often submitted as demos. Many of the same guidelines apply to CDs as cassettes: choose well-recorded material, a wide variety, etc. But with CDs there is no need to make excerpts of your cues. Because of the ease of browsing through the different selections, it is acceptable to include complete cues on a CD. If you are submitting material for a specific project and want to show another side of what you do musically, include additional music after the project-specific material. As with cassettes, keep the material as thematic as possible. But note that cues that sound like underscore are acceptable on the CD demo because they can show a different dimension of your music, and the listener can easily forward through them if he is not interested in hearing the entire cut.

As with cassettes, make all the printed material look professional and eye-pleasing, and include your contact information on a sheet inserted in the jewel case as well as on the CD itself.

Video Reels

Some producers request video reels to show that you not only can write good music, but that you can write appropriate music for dramatic situations. For this reel you might select cues that are different from the ones on a cassette or CD. Cues on the video reel should be your efforts that have really shone as a partner to the drama, which might be different from the cues with the biggest, most impressive musical ideas. In this case, the guideline of finding thematic material doesn't apply; just choose the cues that *look* the best. Make it 10 to 15 minutes long with a variety of styles.

With a video reel, it is customary to begin with a "card" of your name, and your contact information. Visually slate each new cue with a card. The card should say the name of the cue, the project it was from, and any other brief, pertinent information such as the director, studio, TV network, or year of release.

As with cassettes and CDs, make the presentation professional. Have all the contact information on the video itself, and on the box. Print the labels, do not hand-write them.

If you are just getting started and have yet to score any films, there is still a way to produce a video reel. With today's technology, it is fairly easy to rescore a scene from an existing movie and sync it. You will need either a sequencer or the equipment to record live players, one or two VCR machines, a computer (or hard-disc recorder), and a MIDI interface. Choose a scene that has no dialogue, and contains few sound-effects. Then compose your music. If you are using two VCRs,

run the original film synchronized with your music to the second VCR. If you have only one VCR, then you must dub the music directly onto the VCR, erasing any sound already there.

Replacing the music in an already existing film is an accepted way to showcase your ability to write for a dramatic situation. As long as you only use this music as a demo, and it is never aired in public, you are not violating copyright laws.

Résumés and Cover Letters

The promo package you create should include stationery, business cards, and a résumé. Some composers also include a photo and reviews of projects they have completed.

Design, or have a professional design, a logo for your name or the name of your production company. Use this logo on your business cards and stationery. That way, the very first visual that a prospective employer sees is pleasing, and implies that you are professional.

Create a résumé, or, if you are a little further along in your career, use a short bio with a list of credits. If you are just starting out and don't have significant credits, use the résumé format. This should reflect what you have done musically—projects completed, important gigs, awards, internships, teaching, software skills, and recordings. Also include prior work experience and your education. This tells the person reading it where you are coming from, and the scope and depth of your skills. Make the résumé look nice, with a pleasing font, and an easy-to-read and logical format.

If you already have some credits, it is common to submit a short bio, accompanied by a list of credits. This is a more direct document than the résumé, for once you have had some experience, the person considering you for a project probably doesn't care where you went to school, or if you won any composition awards. He wants proof of your credibility, to hear and see your competency, and to get to know you as a person.

Finding Work

Once you have all your materials together, you are ready to go out and get the gigs. That means meeting people anywhere you can, circulating, and knocking on doors. Be prepared for a lot of rejection that has nothing to do with your skills as a composer. But most of all, be prepared to talk, schmooze, and play the game.

There are many avenues for the beginning composer, but the most important thing to do is to expand your circle of contacts. Whether you live in Los Angeles, New York, or anywhere else, there are places where people gather. This could be trade organizations like ASCAP, BMI, or the Society of Composers and Lyricists. It could be a local Media Alliance like the one in Boston that includes producers, directors, actors, composers, and everyone else associated with the entertainment business. Hang out with student film makers or people attending film-making seminars. Go to these events, take a stack of your business cards, and don't expect to get offered a gig; just meet some nice people. You'd be surprised how much fun you can have.

You could also get a job as an intern in a trade organization, at a recording studio, or at a production house. Opportunities like these are often posted at colleges or universities, but usually you will need to be resourceful. Make a list, and hit the phones! Put on your best, most confident telephone voice and find out if they ever need interns or entry level assistants. Keep a log of the responses including the names of all the people you talk to, even the receptionists. If they say, "No, but maybe in the future," wait a couple of months and call again. If they say, "No, we never hire unknowns," then cross them off the list.

Many composers in Hollywood need assistants and hire aspiring composers to help them do a variety of tasks ranging from mundane office work to helping write music. Although hard to come by, these jobs include answering phones, making appointments, sequencing music, repairing equipment, doing transcriptions, and helping with paperwork. These can be great entry-level jobs, but there are not very many of them. To land a job like this you should have excellent organizational skills, people skills, computer skills, and have great sequencing chops.

Another approach is to send your tape to producers of low budget films, documentaries, and cable TV shows. Keep in mind that most unsolicited tapes never get played. So the question becomes how to get your tape into the "solicited" mailbox. There are several ways to do this, but the key is to somehow make personal contact with a producer or director. This can happen in any number of ways: You might meet someone at a party, at a seminar, or at an ASCAP or BMI function. You can call and ask the person's secretary if he is accepting any tapes. Then you call again. And again. And again. Eventually, you might get through and make a pitch for him to hear your stuff.

Once you have sent your tape, follow-up is extremely important. Wait about a week, and then call to "make sure that your tape was received." This is somewhat disingenuous, as that is only part of the reason you are calling. The other part is to keep your name in their face. Be careful here, though. There is a fine line between persistence and annoyance. People get busy, and it is sometimes important to remind them of your existence. But it is also possible to become a pest and create a negative association with your name. Oftentimes, the response will be that the producer has not listened to your tape, or if he has, he is not interested. This is very difficult for some composers to hear because most of us want to believe that the world is waiting to hear our musical creations. However, finding work is often a form of self-promotion. The trick is to become thick-skinned, and not to take rejection as a reflection of your musical ability, personality, or worth as a human being. Take it as simply a result of where a particular person is at that particular day. Perhaps they really have no projects going. Perhaps they already have another composer. Perhaps they really didn't like your music. You need to have the confidence that someone else *will* like your music.

In order to survive in the entertainment business, you must develop a strong sense of who you are and what your music is about. Then all the rejections in the world will not phase you, and you can keep on plugging away. Artists in every aspect of the music industry face this same problem. Billy Joel was rejected from over twenty record labels before he got a shot from Columbia Records. Brian Epstein shopped the Beatles' demo to every label in London before he went back to EMI a second time and got George Martin to give them a try. In interviews for this book, composers such as Alan Silvestri, David Raksin, and Alf Clausen spoke about times when they could barely find work even after having had some degree of success and recognition.

Alf Clausen:

> *The common thread you will find with composers at any level is that we have all suffered a certain amount of abuse and hard knocks through the growth of a career. My own feeling is that the most successful careers are the ones that are able to keep those abuses in perspective and realize that it is only the music business. We are not looking for a cure for cancer. We can only do the best job we do, and hopefully, sometimes we will be lucky enough to be employed by people who like what we do. And sometimes we might be lucky enough to be employed by people who we really like. It's not going to happen all the time.*
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> *Try to keep a center to the vision. We deal in a product, and they are hiring us for our product. Unfortunately, that goes totally against art, it goes against the artistic tendency, and everything else. But it is part of the business, and as long as you learn how to deal with that, you will be much more successful on a daily basis.*

There are many projects involving music happening all over the country, yet the number is finite. And like every other segment of the entertainment industry, there are many more people trying to get work than there are jobs. Who gets what jobs often has nothing to do with who writes the best music or who is most experienced. The important thing is to enjoy writing music and even find a way to enjoy the constant search for work. Composer Lolita Ritmanis speaks about this issue:

> *It's hard to know why one person works and another doesn't. You have to stop wondering why because there's no point to it. There are great composers working on projects that have very little visibility. Their music might be brilliant. So why are they not scoring big studio films? It's often not fair, and worrying about it*

not being fair doesn't change a thing. I've seen quite a bit of disaster as well as success in this business. If you're only waiting for the big break, it can be a long wait and you can really get sick over it. You have to try and enjoy your life, and live a life too.

One thing that young composers should be aware of is *that it takes some time to get established.* There are no overnight success stories; these are all figments of publicists' imaginations. Every composer has paid his dues somewhere, whether it's as an orchestrator, as a studio player, as a rock musician, or as a waiter. If you are just starting out and you don't have the playing skills, or if your cutting-edge band hasn't provided enough income, then you must figure out a way to create an incoming cash flow. Although this might mean getting a "day job" in an office or a restaurant, it is important to create a cushion for yourself so that you can afford to make those demo tapes and CDs, or record a new demo.

Shirley Walker:

You have to be able to afford to be a film composer. I think a lot of people come here to L.A. and they can't support the pursuit of their profession. And that's a hard thing to do. So if you have to make money being a film composer, it's going to be hard for you to get your career started because unless you're coming in at the very top, the beginning level isn't conducive to you supporting yourself.

In addition to these economic realities, it is important to remember that the film business is based on personal relationships. Many composers at the top of the field tell stories about producers or directors that they met when they were just starting out. So nurture the relationships that you make all along the way. Enjoy people as human beings first, as business contacts second. The composer that is looking at everyone he meets as a possible "connection" or source of income is creating a lot of stress for himself, as well as very shallow relationships. If you treat people well, if you treat yourself well, then others will pick up on this and want to be around you. The entertainment business can be very difficult and even delusionary, so reaching out to others as people and having a strong personal center and confidence will carry you through the most difficult situations.

William Ross:

I approach it from the human point of view. Most people are driven to this business out of love for music and film. They're not out to get rich, at least not when they start. It's a hard thing to come out here to Los Angeles with the uncertainties of the business—to uproot yourself, to challenge yourself. To me, anyone who does that is a success, no matter what happens. I say that with utmost sincerity. I think we are in a business where you are a person first, and somewhere down the line you are a composer and you do all that. But the top of the list for me is what kind of person you are, how you treat people, how do you get along with people. That's got to be in place.

Finding work is not easy at any level of the entertainment business. Film scoring can be great work, wonderful work, rewarding work. If you love it, if there's nothing else in the world you would rather do, if you are willing to possibly endure several years of struggling and countless rejections, then go for it! There is no single road to the top; it can happen a million different ways. But you will never find out if you can get there until you try.