

Vicki Hiatt

Film Music Editor

by CAROLINE HORN

When it comes to Vicki Hiatt's cool career, everything you've heard about the educational value of entry-level jobs is true. Hiatt majored in film at the University of California, San Diego, and then worked as a production assistant on the movie *The Stunt Man*. In addition to training her to take good notes and provide administrative assistance, her first position gave her time in the editing room, taught her how to run a projector, and showed her exactly how movies were made. This wonderful introduction got Hiatt started on the path to editing film, and from there she segued into editing film music, racking up credits on such films as *Curious George*, *Ali*, *Madagascar*, and *Chicken Run*. Hiatt took a break from the editing room to chat with us about how she developed her sensitivity for a soundtrack.



MA!: DID YOU HAVE A MENTOR?

VH: Yes. The film business is still an apprentice field—that is, you learn it from another person. I apprenticed for a lot of amazing editors, but the most famous one was Tom Rolf, who got the Academy Award for *The Right Stuff*. He's cut [edited] a lot of Martin Scorsese's films. I was fortunate to work with him on *Jacob's Ladder*, *Dangerous Minds*, and other movies.

HOW DID YOU MOVE FROM FILM EDITING TO MUSIC EDITING? When I was an assistant editor for Tom, I used to work with the music a lot to create what's called a "temp dub," adding music to the film for a screening before the composer starts working. Where there were montages I'd pick out songs, and I got a lot of amazing experience putting music to picture. With each film I worked on, one or two of my music picks were kept for the final version. Then I got deeper into that part of the work.

WHAT'S SOMETHING IMPORTANT YOU LEARNED FROM THAT POSITION? I learned that good storytelling involves good pacing. Just like in music where you have beats, you have a rhythm in the story. Once you recognize that, you can set up the music to support the storytelling.

HOW DID YOU EDIT MUSIC BEFORE THINGS WENT DIGITAL? We cut the actual film up. You had to tap out the beats, then mark on the film where they should go with a grease pencil, roll the music tape over the tape head on the machine to

see the point where the drum solo started, etc. It was very analog, which is to say, very physical. Doing it the old way was an art form.

DID YOU LATER HAVE TO LEARN A SPECIFIC SOFTWARE APPLICATION? When the business changed to digital, yes, I learned Pro Tools—that's the industry standard.

WHAT'S AN EXAMPLE OF A FILM WHERE THE MUSIC WORKS WELL? The music for *District 9* was fantastic, and, of course, everyone always loves the music for *The Dark Knight*. *The Bourne Ultimatum* was great, too.

WHAT MAKES MUSIC SELECTION CHALLENGING? Music is the emotional through-line of the film, and we all know how complicated emotions are. So that's why the music selection can be complicated, too. Most important is that I have to be aware of who the audience for each film is so that I can determine music that would be appropriate for that audience.

WHERE DO YOU GET TURNED ON TO NEW MUSIC? My 17-year-old son plays a lot of things for me. I also go to movies and watch TV and keep my ears open for what's hot.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB? Movies that have a lot of dialogue are hard. The director wants to hear everything being said, so the music has to stay out of the way, and yet it still has to make you feel something. And when the director asks for a recognizable song but there's no budget to license it—that's difficult.

WHAT'S THE MOST FUN PART OF YOUR JOB? When I go see the movie in a theater with a full audience and they laugh where it's supposed to be funny. Then I know it really worked. Live scoring sessions are also exciting to sit in on.

WHAT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT FOR YOUR JOB? You have to really like to work, because the hours are very long in post-production. Also, you have to be organized and take good notes. Knowing how to read music is helpful because sometimes I'm working with charts or lead sheets as well as recorded music. Learn Pro Tools so that you are up to speed on the digital editing techniques. Also you have to be open to a lot of new ideas. When I start on a film, I'm not there to impose my musical taste on the director and the rest of the creative team—I'm there to give them the music that fits with their ideas. 🎧