

THE BRIAN MAY COLLECTION: Two Decades of Screen Composition

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Abstract

Brian May (1934-1997) was a pioneer of the Australian feature film revival period. He was one of the most prolific composers in this period, writing the scores for 22 Australian feature films (from 1975 to 1994), in addition to producing music for Australian television projects and a number of American feature film scores and television series. Brian May bequeathed his collection of music manuscripts and other related items to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. This article outlines the contents of this collection, the gaps in the collection and problems associated with sorting the many thousands of items. It makes a case for the national heritage significance of the collection and its value as a resource for the research of Australian screen music.

Keywords

Brian May, screen composition, music manuscripts, archival research, national heritage

Introduction

Brian May was a major contributor to the Australian feature film revival period that began in the late 1960s. Until his untimely death in 1997, May was one of the nation's most prolific composers, writing the scores for 22 Australian feature films, in addition to producing music for Australian television projects and a number of feature film scores and television series produced in the United States of America (USA). In the Australian feature film score stakes his output is only rivalled by Peter Best (24 scores) and Bruce Smeaton (24 scores). Born in 1934, Brian May studied piano, violin and conducting at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide and, after working for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) as a conductor of the Adelaide Big Band (and also occasionally for the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra), he took on the musical directorship of the ABC's Melbourne Showband in 1969 (Magee, 1996). May achieved major success with his arrangement for the Melbourne Showband of George Dreyfus's theme for the television series *Rush* (Image Records, 1974) which reached No 5 in the Australian national singles charts in December 1974. Apart from *Rush* he worked as a composer and arranger on other ABC television shows such as *Bellbird* and *Countdown*. May's first feature film score was for the sex comedy *The True Story of Eskimo Nell* (Richard Franklin, 1975) which began his association with Richard Franklin (a young director who had been mentored by Alfred Hitchcock). It was May's Herrmannesque score for *Patrick*

(Richard Franklin, 1978) that established his reputation in the horror genre and ultimately led to his winning the scoring assignment for *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and its sequel *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981). May won the 1979 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for best original score for *Mad Max*. Although his international reputation was growing he was not considered high-profile enough to score the big-budget *Psycho II* (1983), although director Richard Franklin originally had him in mind for this project (MacLean, 1997). May suffered a similar slight when the score for *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985) was contracted to Maurice Jarre. Despite these setbacks, May ended his screen career in Hollywood scoring the last of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, *Freddie's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Rachel Talalay, 1991), as well as another horror film *Dr. Giggles* (Manny Coto, 1992) and a television series titled *Blind Side* (Geoff Murphy, 1993).¹

Later in his career, Brian May developed a strong interest in the education of screen composers. In the early 1990s he taught a postgraduate course in screen composition at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University, Australia. As a measure of Brian May's commitment to educating screen composers, a generous scholarship was established under his Will to enable gifted Australian screen composers to study film scoring in the USA. The Brian May Scholarship² was first awarded in 2003 and the intention of the Trustees is to offer it every two years.

Brian May bequeathed his collection of music manuscripts and other related items to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. At the time of his sudden death in 1997, May was about begin teaching screen composition at QUT and for some time prior to that had played an industry consultative role in the music program at QUT.³

In 2007, QUT's Professor Andy Arthurs invited the author to make an assessment of the vast amount of manuscript material that Brian May had left to QUT. I spent from November 26 to December 5, 2007, undertaking an initial sorting of the collection and in 2010 spent three months identifying and listing all the collected items and developing a plan for producing research publications. It is worth mentioning that I am not trained as an archivist, although as a musicologist I have worked with similarly large volumes of music manuscripts and related documents to research my critical biography of Peter Sculthorpe (Hannan, 1982). In the case of the Brian May Collection I also bring specialist knowledge of screen composition to the task.

The Brian May Collection

The material bequeathed to the QUT is held in the Music and Sound building of the Faculty of Creative Industries. The material was donated in an unordered fashion in cardboard boxes. It can be divided into eight different categories: musical equipment; videotapes; professional library (books); professional library (music scores); teaching materials; letters, financial and legal documents; commercial recordings and audio tapes; and music manuscripts. More detailed description of contents of these eight categories is given below. The music manuscripts will be

¹ May's scores for his two *Mad Max* films are discussed in Harley (1998) and Coyle (2004).

² Information about this Scholarship is available at the following URL: <http://www.brianmayscholarship.org/>

³ He was, for example, an industry representative on the panel that appointed Andy Arthurs as Associate Professor and Head of Music at QUT in August 1996.

discussed last. They form the bulk of the collection and are of most significance to the research concerns of *Screen Sound*.

(1) All Brian May's music equipment which originally formed part of his audio production and synchronisation studio plus a white baby grand piano. Operation manuals for all the items of equipment are also included. Electronic music and audio equipment dates very quickly so the items in this category (with the exception of the piano) are of little use now to the music and sound division of QUT for the purpose of teaching electronic music or audio production. However the equipment provides a snapshot of the music and synchronisation technologies typically used by screen composers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The studio could easily be reassembled (and even made operational) as a museum installation.



Figure 1: Brian May in his studio (image courtesy of Brian May Trust).

(2) Six large boxes of videotapes in various tape formats, including time-coded versions of many of the film and television projects on which Brian May worked.⁴ These may be matched to the scores and other materials detailed below.

(3) A library of several hundred books, the titles focusing on music composition techniques, music theory, orchestration, arranging, harmony, counterpoint, improvisation, film music theory and practice, and musicological studies of romantic and contemporary composers. Most of these texts are still readily available to purchase, but the titles provide a valuable insight into the kinds of books that informed May's compositional practice.

(4) A library of about 200 orchestral, chamber, choral and piano scores mostly covering nineteenth and twentieth century compositional practices. European 'romantic' composers who were influential on Hollywood screen music, such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Anton Bruckner, and Ernest Bloch are well represented, but the library also includes multiple scores by twentieth century modernist composers such as Béla Bartók, Igor Stravinsky and Witold Lutoslawski. It should be noted that all composers, but

⁴ There are also videotapes of programs that May dubbed from television, notably golfing programs. May was a keen golfer and the QUT collection also includes golfing memorabilia and a number of golfing trophies that Brian May won.

particularly screen composers (who are often asked to write music simulating another composer's idiom), analyse the scores of other composers in detail in order to understand the intricacies of compositional technique, so May's score library collection may provide insights into his stylistic and technical development as a composer and orchestrator.

(5) A collection of teaching materials relating to screen composition including lecture notes, handouts, publicity material and some correspondence. These materials date from May's teaching contract in the early 1990s with the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University. There is a focus in this curriculum material on illustrating the film scoring techniques of Bernard Herrmann, particularly the score to *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Great attention is also given to Brian May's own scores as a means to demonstrate how image track is set to music. May takes advantage of the rich materials at his disposal: time-coded video without music, cue sheets deriving from spotting sessions, sketches of cues for particular scenes, the fleshed-out realisation of cues in orchestrated scores and the final versions of music cues recorded and dubbed to picture. May's notes for his postgraduate course may be assembled and edited into a textbook that would be valuable in illustrating a particular slant on how to go about writing music for film.

(6) A small selection of correspondence, financial and legal documents and press clippings. Unfortunately most of the financial and legal documents that Brian May would have had in his business office files (such as screen composition contracts and project budgets) have not been included in the bequeathed collection. In addition May appears not to have made copies of letters that he sent to business associates, friends or acquaintances, and he appears to have kept very little of the business and personal correspondence that he would have received. Although May collected some press material about his work, there are surprisingly very few items included in the collection considering the length and prominence of his career. The lack of material in these areas poses a serious problem for compiling a comprehensive biographical account of May's life and career. Of course these kinds of documents might be available in other collections held by a member or members of Brian May's family, although sources of such relevant documents are yet to be identified.

(7) A small number of commercial vinyl recordings and reel-to-reel recordings of Brian May's screen music and band music. Analogue recordings will need to be carefully handled and digitally restored and archived for these to be useful in the future.

(8) A very large collection of music manuscripts covering the bulk of the screen music projects that May worked on. The collection of music manuscripts is the centerpiece of the collection. It can basically be divided into two categories. The first of these is mostly projects for which no material other than the orchestrated film scores survives. Generally this material was bundled in a way that made it easy to identify which projects the manuscripts were associated with.

In this first category fully orchestrated sets of cues were identified for the following feature films: *Patrick* (Richard Franklin, 1978), *Mad Max, Thirst* (Rod Hardy, 1979), *The Survivor* (David Hemmings, 1980), *Harlequin* (Simon Wincer, 1980), *Nightmares* (John Lamond, 1980), *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981), *Roadgames* (Richard Franklin, 1981), *A Dangerous Summer* (Quentin Masters, 1981), *Breakfast in Paris* (John Lamond, 1981), *Slice of Life* (John Lamond, 1982), and *Turkey Shoot* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1982). In addition there are orchestrated sets of cues for the

television series *Barnaby and Me* (Norman Panama, 1976), *No Room to Run* (Robert Michael Lewis, 1976), *And Here Comes Bucknuckle* (Norman Johnson and Keith Wilkes, 1981), and *Tales from the Crypt* (episode 'Split Second') (Russell Mulcahy, 1991).

For all these projects it was possible to make a list of all the music cues, which are traditionally numbered in order of appearance in a film. In doing this, potentially missing elements can be identified. For example the cue inventory for *Mad Max* consisted of the orchestrated cues labelled with a typical numbering system: MMI, MM2, MM3, MM5, etc.

Of particular interest is the fact that cues MM4, MM18, and cues MM24 to MM34 are missing, as are pages 1-4 of cue MM23B. It could be that the manuscripts for these missing cues and pages have been lost, or that they were discarded because they were not used, or even that an eccentric numbering system had been adopted. This number may relate to an original spotting session between composer, director and/or producer. In order to gain some insight into this situation it would be necessary to check the individual manuscripts of the cues against the soundtrack of the film. It is common for cues to be written and recorded but eventually not used on a film soundtrack.

The score for *Mad Max 2: Road Warrior* was also part of this category but unfortunately the orchestrated cues for this film were damaged when a flash flood inundated the building where May was storing his manuscripts. Most of the pages of this score are fused together and there is badly decaying mouldy paper around the edges. It may be possible for the individual pages of the score to be saved, at least in part, by manuscript restoration experts. Luckily screen composers and orchestrators work almost entirely in pencil. If these pages had been written in ink the notes would have become illegible. Fortunately this is the only score in the whole collection adversely affected by water damage.

The second category is for screen music projects for which the available manuscript material is far more extensive, usually consisting of fully orchestrated scores, short scores, compositional sketches, and cue sheets. This category poses by far the greatest archival challenge, as it was not bundled in any coherent way. Rather, the material in this category was dispersed in an unruly manner throughout the forty or so boxes in which the collection was delivered to QUT.

Projects in this category are the feature films *The True Story of Eskimo Nell*, *Race for the Yankee Zephyr* (David Hemmings, 1981), *The Killing of Angel Street* (Donald Crombie, 1981), *Kitty and the Bagman* (Donald Crombie, 1982), *Turkey Shoot* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1982), *Sky Pirates* (Colin Eggleston, 1986), *Frog Dreaming* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1986), *Hurricane Smith* (Colin Budds, 1990), *Bloodmoon* (Alec Mills, 1990), *Dead Sleep* (Alec Mills, 1990), *Cloak and Dagger* (Richard Franklin, 1984), *Missing in Action 2* (Lance Hool, 1985), *Death before Dishonor* (Terry Leonard, 1987), *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* and *Dr Giggles*. The television projects are *The Last Outlaw* (Kevin James Dobson and George Miller, 1980), the mini-series *Return to Eden* (Karen Arthur and Keven James Dobson, 1983), five episodes of the extended series *Return to Eden* (Kevin James Dobson, 1986), *The Last Frontier* (Simon Wincer, 1986), *Darlings of the Gods* (Catherine Millar, 1989), *A Dangerous Life* (Robert Markowitz, 1988), *Dark Justice* (Jeff Freilich, 1991), and *Blind Side*.

Sorting the Screen Music Collection

In working with the Brian May Collection, most of my time was spent trying to identify which screen project a particular piece of music manuscript (either an orchestrated cue, a short score of a cue, or a musical sketch) was related to. The scale of this task is worth describing because it raises issues related to the role of the archivist. Each of these 22 projects involves up to one thousand pieces of music manuscript paper. When the individual pages of music manuscript of any one screen music project were eventually stacked in a single pile, the height of the stack ranged between 15 centimetres and 25 centimetres. Because of the large number of pages and the consistency in the brands, formats, colours and sizes of the manuscript paper employed, it was necessary to devise a workable strategy to sort the material. Film music cues are often titled using the name(s) of the character or characters who feature(s) in the scene associated with the cue. Knowing this I created a database of the names of all the characters in each of the films and television series that Brian May worked on. This was not a foolproof system since many of the projects involved characters with the same names (for example there is a Jake in *Blind Side* and in *East of Eden* and a Jennifer in *Blood Moon*, *Dr Giggles* and *Turkey Shoot*).

Although I managed to identify most of the many thousands of items, a significant number of items (around 2% of the total number of items) remain unidentified (although with further work particularly involving thematic identification this amount may be significantly reduced).

In addition to screen score items there were also significant amounts of manuscript material relating to Brian May's other career as an arranger, musical director and conductor, for example, May was involved in a major concert for the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988. There are extensive manuscripts of song arrangements and other documentation relating to this event. May also conducted concerts that included the main title themes from his screen projects. There are scores of theme medleys associated with these concerts.

For the 23 projects in the second category, the presence of different versions of cue sheets, different sketches for particular cues, as well as short scores and orchestrated scores allows the screen music researcher to follow the creative process of screen composition. May's sketches typically consist of a single melody line with chord symbols, dialogue cues and timings scribbled above the staff. The short scores follow the standard practice of setting out the music neatly on four staves with detailed indications of the orchestration indicated. This short score is then used as the basis for the fully orchestrated score.

One of the next tasks in the assessment of the collection is to identify any orchestrators for particular projects. Like many screen composers, May preferred to do his own orchestrations (Magee, 1996: 178) but the extremely short deadlines for some of his screen projects sometimes made this impractical. Orchestrators with credits on May's projects include Fred Steiner (for *Cloak and Dagger*), Maurie Sheldon and Michael Linn (on *Freddie's Dead: The Final Nightmare*) but there may be other uncredited orchestrators who might be detected or identified by their different musical handwriting. The Australian screen composer Nerida Tyson-Chew, for example, told me in an interview (Hannan 2008) that she worked for Brian May as an apprentice on some of his later projects, confessing that she had some difficulty (because of her classical music composition background) understanding the complex jazz chord symbols that May used in his sketches. This suggests that one of her assignments was turning May's sketches into short score.

Gaps in the Collection

There are some screen projects that Brian May is known to have worked on, but for which there are no manuscripts or other documents in the collection. There appears to be no manuscript material in the collection for the following feature films: *Innocent Prey* (Colin Eggleston, 1984) and *Snapshot* (Simon Wincer, 1978). Similarly there is no manuscript material related to these television series: *Bellbird* (Vernon, 1967-77), *Catspaw* (John Gauci, Michael Ludbrook and David Zweek, 1978), *New Wave* (Rob Weekes, 1974), *Countdown* (Walter Boston and Ted Emery, 1974), *The Sentimental Bloke* (Alan Burke, 1976), *Deadline* (Arch Nicholson, 1982), and *Carson's Law* (Terry Stapleton [creator], 1983).

This is not to suggest that the material is lost. Much of the television work (and some features) that May did early in his career was as an employee of the ABC. The music manuscripts and other documents relating to May's contributions to these projects may well be found in the National Archives in Chester Hill (Sydney) which holds music scores for the Melbourne Showband covering the years when May was its musical director.⁵

Conclusion: The Significance of the Brian May Collection

The manuscripts in the Brian May Collection are of considerable heritage value in relation to the history of film production in Australia. Certainly there is nothing like this collection held by any public institution. The National Library of Australia (NLA) has made significant progress in preserving the manuscripts and private papers of Australian concert composers such as Peter Sculthorpe and Keith Humble (both of whom, it should be said, have accumulated significant screen music credits) but has not yet initiated a similar project for career screen composers. In Australia interest in the preservation of feature film and television music remains undeveloped compared to the United States where the Film Music Society has taken on a preservation mission following news reports in the 1970s that major film studios were dumping film score manuscripts as landfill.⁶ The notable exception in Australia is the preservation of the hundreds of scores of documentary films made by the Commonwealth Film Unit (later Film Australia). These are held in the National Archives.

The work that I have been doing and will continue to do on the Brian May collection will prepare the music manuscripts and personal papers part of the collection for possible inclusion in a major national collection such as the NLA.⁷ In order for an institution like the NLA to accept such a large collection of papers as this, extensive preliminary work needs to be done by an expert so that all items in the collection (down to individual pieces of music manuscript) can be correctly identified. This kind of work was done, for example, by John Whiteoak on the *Music Scores and Papers of Keith Humble* (MS 9402, NLA) and by Adrienne Levenson on the *Papers of Peter Sculthorpe* (MS 9676, NLA) before they could be accepted by the

⁵ Email correspondence with Susan Kennedy (Records Officer and TRIM Administrator, Technology and Communications Networks, ABC), October 15, 2009.

⁶ See <http://www.filmmusicsociety.org/about/about.html>.

⁷ I have discussed this possibility with the QUT custodians. Any plans for the Collection would be subject to negotiations with the Trustees of Brian May's Will and with his family.

NLA. Significantly a major biographical study of Sculthorpe by Skinner (2007) has drawn extensively on documents in the NLA, and Skinner has done concentrated work on a second volume of the biography as a Harold White Fellow of the NLA in 2007. I mention this particular case because I consider it an excellent example of the facilitation of research through the public availability of ordered collections of personal papers. Once my assessment work of the Brian May Collection is complete, the Collection will become a significant resource for researching screen music in the formative period of the modern Australian film industry. It will allow researchers like myself to carry out detailed case studies⁸ of the work of a prominent screen composer and in an area of artistic activity where there are major gaps in the academic literature. These kinds of case studies will help us to build up a solid base of evidence to support a bigger overview reflection on the Australian screen music industry.

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⁸ An example of a detailed case study of film scores in this period of the Australian feature film is Coyle and Hannan (2005).

Composer Brian May first got in contact with director George Miller and producer Byron Kennedy after director Richard Franklin played the two May's score for his then-upcoming film *Patrick* (1978).[3] Because the score resembled the work of Bernard Herrmann, May ultimately won the assignment of composing music for *Mad Max*.^[4] "The sort of score they wanted was the sort. that Bernard Herrmann and Co. did in Hitchcock films," recalled May, "because they had a big action movie and they needed a score to propel it along and give it a lot of bite and energy." "The Brian May Collection: Two Decades of Screen Composition" (PDF). *Screen Sound Journal* (1): 60. Retrieved 15 May 2015. ^ Harley, Ross (5 August 1998). Brian May (1934-1997) was a pioneer of the Australian feature film revival period. He was one of the most prolific composers in this period, writing the scores for 22 Australian feature films (from 1975 to 1994), in addition to producing music for Australian television projects and a number of American feature film scores and television series. Brian May bequeathed his collection of music manuscripts and other related items to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. This article outlines the contents of this collection, the gaps in the collection and problems asso