

spotting notes


Guild of Canadian Film Composers

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The Guild of Canadian Film Composers is a national association of professional music composers and producers for film, television, and new media.

STRENGTHENING CANADA'S FILM INDUSTRY

by Darren Fung



Our dollar is rising. For the Canadian patriot in us, it's a small shot to our ego to see our dollar valued more than our southern neighbours. However, Canadian businesses and industries are feeling the pinch; it has suddenly become more expensive for our neighbors to do business, and the film industry is no exception.

With the Canadian dollar reaching record highs, there is renewed concern that foreign productions will choose locations other than Canada. Increased competition from many other jurisdictions in the United States as well as abroad, has taken a toll on the industry. According to the Toronto Film Board, competition has become so stiff that now over two-thirds of all American production is shot outside of Los Angeles.

When the Canadian dollar started to make a comeback in 2004, overall production decreased by 43% in British Columbia. According to the Toronto Film Board, major production spending in Toronto declined more than 35% in the past five years.

Nova Scotia Premier Rodney MacDonald recently announced that his province would increase its film tax credit to a whopping 50% in an attempt to lure more production work to his province. Also, BC Premier Gordon Campbell recently announced that he was extending the province's tax credit program for another five years.

Perhaps British Columbia Film put it best on their website, "tax incentives are the common currency that draws film and television production to various locations throughout the world."

As a community that is involved strictly in the post-production stages, film and media composers see little, if any direct benefit to foreign productions shooting in Canada. The American Federation of Musicians Vancouver Local 145 former president Bobby Hales put it quite eloquently, "The one thing for sure is that any 'runaway productions' of films to Canada, with its cost of jobs to U.S. citizens, applies to the technical side only and not to the musical side."

So how do all of these tax credits affect film and media composers in Canada?

Part of BC Film's strategy for competitiveness includes maintaining a strong and sustainable domestic sector. Production activity, whether foreign or domestic, plays a big role in determining the collective financial well being of the industry that we work in. Large foreign productions invest in the development of our domestic infrastructure and talent.

So what are we doing to encourage and strengthen domestic, Canadian productions?

Telefilm is Canada's cultural agency that is "dedicated to the development and promotion of the Canadian audiovisual industry." April 2001 marked the birth of the Canada Feature Film Fund, which now invests \$50 million annually towards the creation of Canadian feature films from "script-to-screen."

cont. on page 6



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VIEW FROM THE PODIUM

by Meiro Stamm, VP

“Sometimes it’s the little things”

It’s that time of year again when we think about the accomplishments and failures of the previous year and our hopes and goals for the new one. Whether the goals we set are creative, business, or otherwise, the means to achieve them will come from creative thinking. “Thinking outside the box” as we so often hear. What does that really mean, anyway? If everyone is “outside” maybe the creative thing to do is think “inside the box.” It’s an old joke but perhaps there is some wisdom to it. And maybe some of the “inside/outside the box thinking” needs to be about small things.

Why small things? Well, a few years ago, while working on a series under very challenging circumstances, the music editor recommended a book to me called *The Tipping Point: How Small Things Can Make A Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell. It’s a book about epidemics. Not medical epidemics like the plague, but social epidemics like how trends in popular culture start or the crime rate in a city. One of the case studies presented was about how felonies in the New York City subway were reduced by 75 percent by cracking down on fare jumpers – a small thing that made a huge difference. And isn’t that what we all want? To experience an “epidemic” of lots of well-paying, interesting projects coming our way and musical inspiration to match? To see trends in industry practice that are favourable to our profession?

One thing that has made a big difference to me is how I think of my business. I used to say that I worked “freelance” until I really thought about what that word means: medieval mercenary for hire, uncommitted in politics or personal life. The implication to me was that this meant I didn’t really believe in anything and would simply take whatever work I could get – not really a great underlying philosophy on which to build a career and business. Once I came up with a set of definitions for my business that were not “freelance,” I found that it was much easier for me to set short and long-term goals, decide what kind of projects I wanted to work on, and reject, without worry, those that didn’t fit my criteria. The result has been that I have had more varied and rewarding (financially and creatively) projects. It was just one word, but removing it from how I defined my business has made all the difference.

Having received a fair number of demos from aspiring composers as well as having sat on several Gemini Award juries, I’ve become a little worried over the past few years by the homogenizing affect that electronics are having on scores. It’s not just a creative concern, but in my mind, also a very real threat to our business. How does one convincingly argue for original music and a decent production budget when so many scores sound the same because of the loop libraries used? All it takes is one live instrument to bring life

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cont. on page 7



6-PACK OF QUESTIONS WITH FISH-FRY MUSIC AND SOUND

by Mike Freedman

fish-fry music and sound is a Toronto-based music production company featuring principal composers Greg Fisher and Derek Treffry. Good friends for more than 20 years, Greg and Derek joined forces in 1999, and ever since, fish-fry has been composing and producing music for all aspects of broadcast including television, film, commercials, and new media.

1 How does the collaborative process of writing for media differ from something like co-songwriting?

Greg Fisher: Logistically, quite different. Derek and I both contribute individually to create a body of work vs. co-writing/working together on every piece.

Derek Treffry: Fundamentally, I'm not sure the process is really that different. If you are a composer working with a lyricist, you have to take what could be two disparate approaches, opinions, philosophies and meld them together into one cohesive end product.

2 Do you write together in the same room or divide the tasks and scenes?

GF: Generally, we write separately after we divvy up the work. We started out writing everything together, but over time, our collaboration has evolved to a more administrative level.

DT: Early on, we used to compose together in the same room much more often than we do now. But it didn't take us long to realize that with two composers you need at least twice as much work coming in to make a living.

3 Composing is generally viewed as a lonely profession. Do you feel that you are able to avoid this by working together?

GF: Working together definitely alleviates the "solitude" that I would imagine can occur as a composer. One of the benefits is knowing there is someone else working with me to achieve a common goal – and that motivates me.

DT: Definitely. Even though we don't often work in the same room, we're in constant communication throughout the day. There is a certain level of comfort in knowing there is someone else "on the team" you can get at a moment's notice.

4 Since there are two you, does it take longer to make final decisions? Or is the writing process faster because there are more ideas flowing?

DT: From a composing standpoint, I think it can take longer to make final decisions – if you let it. But it doesn't have to. This is a pretty subjective field, and what I or anyone else thinks is "good" or "right" may differ from the next person.

GF: I feel that we are both more productive in the partnership than if we were on our own. The ability to share administration and promotion efforts (the business of our craft) means we both have more time/energy/creativity to write (the craft of our business).

5 If people were interested in collaborating, what advice would you give them?

GF: Make sure you trust, believe in, like, and are motivated by the person. That being said, ensure you have a plan prepared for dissolution before you begin working together.

DT: I think you definitely need a good match of personalities to collaborate long-term. You could be two of the best composers in the world and do fantastic work together, but if you can't get along on a personal level, I doubt it would last for very long.

6 How do you decide on the split of screen credit and compensation?

GF: All production money goes into the partnership from which we draw an equal salary and all business bills are split 50/50. Royalties are all split 50/50 irrespective of who does the work. For screen credit we request the company name, fish-fry music & sound.

DT: If you're just collaborating on one project, and once that project is over you'll be going your separate ways, I would imagine that you would divide things up as equitably as you could, based on who did how much work. But in a situation like ours, the collaboration doesn't end with the project. We need another job waiting for us. **SN**

NEW TRENDS IN FILM MUSIC EDUCATION

by Darren Fung

There has been a lack of formalized training in composing for film and media in Canada. Many emerging Canadian composers have migrated down south to attend programs offered in the United States, such as those at the University of Southern California (USC), University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Berklee College of Music and New York University (NYU).

Film and media education has moved beyond learning how to write music. On the contrary, film music education is generally based on the premise that its students know how to write. Many of these courses and programs are offered at the graduate level, and cater to those who have trained in the classical traditions, often having a Bachelor of Music degree as pre-requisite.

“Composers have to become engineers, editors, and producers as well. There is an entire administrative layer of knowledge that needs to be understood such as workflow, marketing and negotiating,” says Yuri Gorbachow, an instructor at Toronto’s Harris Institute for the Arts. “The educational process must be widened to include these new realities.”

But the landscape is changing. Technology, business models, markets, and even the mediums are all shifting. Gorbachow continues: “Technical standards are rapidly being introduced and subsequently outdated. Costs for producing very high quality music have dropped as have the revenues.”

“Today, with the proliferation of music media courses, there are many more professional educators whose challenge is to keep up with

the ‘street’ knowledge – what is happening today in the scoring session, the dub [or final mix] and the home studio,” says Richard Bellis, former instructor at USC who is currently teaching at UCLA.

The Advanced Certificate in Scoring for Motion Pictures and Television program at USC is regarded by many as one of the (if not *the*) most prestigious programs to attend. They recently went through a major overhaul to become more relevant to emerging composers.

The USC program has evolved beyond the traditional orchestration and composition lessons, and now includes modules such as a Digital Video/Final Cut Pro Workshop; a marketing course taught by composer agent Richard Kraft; a music editing course and

cont. on page 7

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NETWORKING 101

by Mike Fredeman

As creative individuals, our careers are based on others compensating us for our unique skills and talents. Knowing the right individuals is essential in order for our music to find an audience. Three up and coming composers share their take on the “networking game” and how they find work as film composers.

What networking strategies do you find work best?

Steve London: First, talk to everyone you know who has anything to do with the industry. Have them connect you with someone who will take a demo, take a meeting or put you in touch with the appropriate contacts.

Jeff Toyne: Every three to six months, I go through my address book and call or e-mail everyone to let him or her know I still exist. I tell them what I’ve been up to and catch up on what they’re doing. Maybe they need a new demo CD with the latest tracks, or perhaps a screening is coming up that they or I could attend. This includes colleagues. I get more gigs from other composers than any other source.

Once you establish a positive rapport with someone in the industry, how do you nurture and develop that relationship?

Maria Molinari: It’s often the simple things that go a long way, like an occasional email just to say hi. Let them know what you are up to from time to time. Show up at their screenings even when you weren’t the composer for that particular project.

JT: I spend a certain amount of energy on publicity. If I do a great job on a project, it really helps if the right individuals know about it. I take the time to let people know about upcoming events. Web pages and e-mail makes this easier, but I rarely miss the opportunity to speak to a contact in person.

How do you avoid the “used car salesman” feeling when approaching new contacts?

SL: Cold calling is marketing yourself to someone else in a minute or less. If you can’t talk about yourself plainly, simply and honestly without bragging or downplaying your skills and accomplishments, don’t cold call.

JT: I don’t do a lot of cold calling, but when I do meet a potential collaborator, I think the easiest way to avoid feeling like you need a shower after “the schmooze” is to be honest about who you are, what you do, and what you’re interested in doing. For example, if you meet a producer who happens to be making a film about Kabuki, you won’t be doing them or yourself any favours by pretending to know traditional Japanese music.

How do you seek out work?

MM: For the most part, people come to me. Usually, it’s been through other composers or musicians in the industry who know my work and have recommended me for gigs. I also recently launched a website. It’s a handy way to give prospective clients immediate access to samples of my work instead of waiting for a demo. I’ve been surprised by the impact a website can have on getting calls out of the blue.

What was the least likely way you made a good contact?

SL: Cold calling. But, I happened to get my first big gig that way. I accidentally got the president of the production company who then transferred me to the producer. I think that inadvertently gave me the credibility I needed.

MM: A buddy of my brother’s was a computer tech who did some work on my PC once. I didn’t know it at the time, but he was developing an online video game and I ended up doing some of the music. Go figure.

In terms of obtaining work, how important would you rate your “people skills” in relation to your “composing skills?”

JT: People skills can’t be underestimated. Even if you are being sought out specifically because of your music or a previous project, you will not be hired until after a face-to-face meeting. On more than one occasion, someone who has never heard a note of my music ending up hiring me. My first feature was a *film noir*, and at that point, I had never written a note of jazz. Why was I hired? Because I showed “enthusiasm for the project.”

SL: My estimation is that 75-80% of getting work is dependent on your people skills. The remaining 20-25% of the equation are your composing skills.

cont. on page 6

Networking, continued

Which “people skills” are most important in this industry?

SL: The ability to take direction and be easy-going. If you can take direction without getting upset or difficult, people will continue to work with you. Don't ever get sour with a director or producer. It's their movie. You are only a collaborator and that attitude will get you nowhere. Do your best to be creative, focused and collaborative. Don't stress them out by being contrary, cynical, blasé or flippant.

MM: Understanding the human psyche is always helpful. We all have egos and when a job is creative it is easy to lose perspective and for things to become personal. Patience, being a good listener and diplomacy are all good. Also, I think it really is an asset if you take a genuine interest in people. Be sincere.

How do you save the “great guy, but terrible person to work for” scenario, or vice versa?

MM: Patience, patience and more patience. Sometimes it means counting to ten, or it can mean walking away once the project is done and acknowledging that perhaps the relationship is best if kept on a non-work level.

JL: I've had directors hand me the film and say, “See you at the dub,” and I've had directors with their hand overtop of mine at the keyboard. Most fall somewhere in the middle. The one thing they all had in common was they could see the entire film as a whole in their mind. They knew exactly what each and every moment meant to the big picture. Jerry Goldsmith always scored his film like the film it was intended to be, not necessarily the film it turned out to be. **SN**



Steve London is a native of Port Perry, Ontario, who now lives and works in both Los Angeles and Toronto. Steve has been nominated for a Gemini Award for *The Ripping Friends* (2001) and *What It's Like Being Alone* (2007). Other films include cult-hit *Shallow Ground* and *That Beautiful Somewhere*.



Maria Molinari composes music for film, television, dance and the concert stage. Her film/TV credits include the animated series *Freaky Stories*, the independent film *The Dog* as well as contributions of additional music to the sci-fi series *Mutant X* and the CBC comedy series *Getting Along Famously for Q Music Inc.* Also active in the areas of concert music and dance, her repertoire includes chamber music, orchestral compositions, ballet music, choral works and arrangements.



Jeff Toyne is emerging as one of today's most promising composers for film and television. His recent feature film credits include *Shadow in the Trees* (2007), *Elektra*, and *The Third Eye* (2007). Among his other credits Jeff counts over forty short films, including two Academy Award nominees. He was composer for *The Two Coreys* (A&E 2007), has composed the music for CTV's *The Daily Blade*, and has contributed to many Discovery Channel and Fox Kids programs.

Strengthening, continued

They spent the last year consulting with industries in both the English and French markets. As a result, Telefilm initiated numerous shifts in strategy, many of them expanding on their “performance envelope” initiatives, where production companies are guaranteed financing based on their previous box-office success. Telefilm has moved towards making envelope financing more accessible and flexible, especially in English Canada.

But not everyone is a fan of the performance envelope system. In Quebec, 43 directors signed an open letter to then Heritage Minister Bev Oda published in Montreal's French daily *La Presse* denouncing the system. Prominent directors including Robert Lepage (*Jésus de Montréal*) and Léa Pool (*Papillon bleu*) complained that too few people were receiving all the money.

The chief argument against the performance envelope is that it promotes commercial, Hollywood-style films. In his testimony to a parliamentary committee, Halifax thespian and ACTRA Maritime president Nigel Bennett was blunt, “it encourages sameness.” It's hard to ignore these arguments, especially as a country struggling to maintain our cultural sovereignty from our American neighbours.

Before the Canada Feature Film Fund came about, only 1.7% of box office receipts were for Canadian films. In the past three years, Canadian films consistently took home over 4% of the market share, peaking in 2005 at 5.3%. In 2006, English-Canadian film had its best performance yet, taking home 1.6% of the market.

Despite all the criticism of Telefilm, and there is a lot of it, one must give credit where credit is due. Before the Canada Feature Film Fund came about, only 1.7% of box office receipts were for Canadian films. In the past three years, Canadian films consistently took home over 4% of the market share, peaking in 2005 at 5.3%. In 2006, English-Canadian film had its best performance yet, taking home 1.6% of the market.

Despite the growth, new opportunities also create new challenges. Oddly enough, the push towards cultural diversity, as important and as noble as it is, presents its own problems. Countries are focusing on building their own domestic film market, and as a result, international co-production money is getting harder and harder to find. New digital technologies that provide alternatives to traditional forms of production and distribution bring up copyright and piracy concerns.

As Canada looks to strengthen its film industry both in a service and domestic production capacity, one thing is certain: Our governments and funding agencies will not only have to provide direct support, but adapt in the face of an ever-changing environment. **SN**

View, continued

and increased believability to an otherwise electronic score. A live shaker track is a small thing that makes a big difference. This is not news, but it seems to me that we need to make a bigger deal of this kind of production detail if we want to wave the flag of original music proudly.

What about staying creatively fresh in our writing? We all need an inspirational boost every once in a while and often a small adjustment in how we approach a piece of

music can make a big difference. Choosing an odd time signature that one isn't used to can lead to all kinds of rhythmic discoveries. I had some interesting rhythmic discoveries while playing in a gamelan orchestra a few years ago. The music wasn't rhythmically difficult but the way the parts interlocked around the core melody made me think very differently about how I wrote melody and accompaniment. Add to that the fact that it took me over a month to realize that the big gong was not marking beat one but rather beat four

of bar thirty-two...knowing where beat one is...a small thing that makes a big difference!

My examples are only a few of an infinite number of small things that any one of us can do to stimulate growth in ourselves as creators and business people. What else? I'd love to hear more examples from the membership whether they are creative, production, or business ideas. Post to the GCFC discussion list and maybe somebody's small idea will be the big idea we all need. **sn**

Trends, continued

a course on writing for video games in collaboration with the USC Zemeckis Center for the Digital Arts.

"You really go through the process and the experience is really valuable. It's great to be able to make a mistake, screw up a cue, have a meltdown on the podium and nobody will ever fire you. It's stressful, but it's still a real safe place to try stuff," says Jeff Toyne, an instructor and alumnus at USC. "Experience is a huge teacher – that's why people are going there."

"The entire curriculum has been revamped to prepare composers for the real world," says program director Brian King. "We are a vocational program working in an academic environment."

Those words can accurately describe many of the problems that film and media programs encounter. As a relatively new concept in academia, film and media music programs deal with a unique set of growing pains. One of which, is finding people who have the skill set of both a teacher and a practitioner.

"Media music courses, at one time, were taught almost exclusively by either working or retired professionals," Bellis remarks. "While much of the information was 'from the horses mouth,' it was often presented by what could only be termed, 'amateur educators.'"

"The biggest challenges come when our instructors' teaching schedules conflict with their work schedules," says King. "[I'll often] have four instructors who can cover for one another when the need arises. At present, we have 18 instructors in place, all part-time, to serve a program that is comprised of 20 students."

Despite the challenges, there's no question of the industry insiders' value. Beside the valuable knowledge they pass on, they offer networking and job opportunities to their students. Students at USC have the opportunity to intern with composers like Michael Giacchino, where they can participate in an episode of *Lost*, from spotting session to the final dub.

"Composers in LA know that if they want an assistant, they can go to USC and get one," notes Toyne. "[But students also] come away knowing all the guys in their class, and they're a huge resource. If you're ever in a crunch or you need some help, your buddies are there for you."

Recognizing both the market and the value of film and media composition, many Canadian universities have begun to offer these courses and programs to its students.

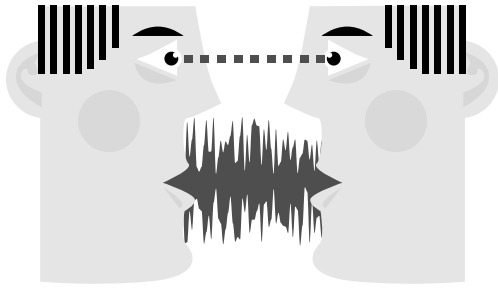
In September, the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) started Canada's first film and media scoring program (beyond a single course), while the Université de Montréal will begin its program in January 2008. McGill has been offering a single film-scoring course for a few years now. The University of Western Ontario and the University of Toronto recently put out tenure-track calls for professors specializing in music for film and media.

What seems to be a common thread in all programs is the importance placed on interaction between filmmaker and music maker. UQÀM's program was actually an initiative of their communications (film) department, where they proactively match composers and filmmakers for their final projects. USC sets up composer pitching sessions that coincide with the filmmakers' post-production schedules. McGill encourages their students to find their own short film to score for their final project. Both USC and UQÀM have their filmmakers and composers sitting in the same class.

But at the end of the day, it is not necessarily the credentials that will get emerging composers the job. An academic program can open doors, but it is ultimately an emerging composer's passion and desire that will determine his or her transition from academia into the real world.

"The toughest part of the job is telling your students that the next three to five years will be the worst of their lives, that their parents won't love them, and that they will starve," says Pierre-Daniel Rheault, instructor at McGill and Université de Montréal. "Talent is not enough. It's about how eager they are, and how badly they want it."

Bellis agrees: "Successful education in any subject is, at least to some extent, dependent on passion. Passion from the student and the teacher. As we know, a degree is the last thing one needs to get a job as a film and television composer." Bellis continues: "Higher education should not only be about preparation, 'how do I become a...?' but equally about decision making, 'should I follow this career path?' Educators have the responsibility to give their students all the information necessary to make these life altering decisions." **sn**



Counterpoint

Should the Canadian film and media community adopt a mandatory minimum rate?

As far I can remember, the film/media composer community has always seen newcomers to our industry as a big problem. I've read in different publications that some of our young composers are willing to pay money out of their own pockets to land their first gig. Newcomers cut prices way under what we would promote as a fair rate.

Minimum rates are a way of setting parameters for newbies who are asking, "How much should I charge for this gig?" It can also set standards and precedents for buyouts, which are outlawed under your SOCAN agreement. In Quebec, where SPACQ has a collective agreement and minimum rate, the minimum is rarely, if ever, applied when it comes to the fee. A minimum fee sets the rate for a newcomer, not the veteran composer.

◆ As far as many others can remember, newcomers were never a "big problem." The question, "How much do I charge for this gig?" is front and centre for everyone. Producers are simply trying to save money. They've discovered that budgets for original music are more flexible than, let's say, catering. The problem is that composers do not defend their fees powerfully and effectively. They're afraid of "the next experienced good composer" (not the newcomer) agreeing to a lower fee. Those "next" composers likely don't know how much they *could* have asked or how much they might actually be worth to the project. Compulsory Minimum Fees simply don't speak to these issues.

● Newcomers were never the problem, provided they never got the gig! When they do get the gig, they propose low budgets out of *naïveté* and that considerably damages the

market. Producers don't recognize the value of music, and this is why a minimum fee needs to be set. If the chicken and rice on the craft table is not negotiable, why should our fees be?

◆ If newcomer *naïveté* is the source of declining fees, then that is what should be addressed. Creating "Compulsory Minimum Fees" with the necessary "Minimum Fee Police" and bloating bureaucracy does little to dispel *naïveté*. We need to make available the tools for both composers and producers to answer the age-old question of "how much?" For example, information on industry practices and fees is available in Butterworth's *Entertainment Law in Canada* or *Film Music Monthly's* Survey of Fees. We have a model contract, so let's take it further and develop a suggested list of fees. We must publicly press government at all levels to increase the value of the music budget, especially where tax and public money is involved. Also, shouldn't we have Telefilm insist that the committed music budget is actually *spent* on music?

● I could not agree more. A proactive strategy is the real key to a better environment for us. We need to impress the "bigger picture" upon the younger members of our community. If all the pitfalls of the business were given the same importance as voice leading and MIDI, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation today. In Quebec, we started out with a "suggested" schedule of rates for film. The problem was that producers would still ask us to go well below the minimum rates. We've all been put into a position where we accept a gig for less than what we are worth. That is why SPACQ's members asked for a compulsory minimum rate.

◆ It's premature to move towards compulsory minimum fees when we don't even have guidelines set up to help producers and composers. Doing so could have many unintended consequences. Compulsory Minimums have a nasty historical habit of turning into "the standard fee." Also, given the choice between an experienced composer versus a new, untested name fresh out of school, producers usually go with experience. Meanwhile, the new composer loses a chance to start their career.

The downward pressure on fees continues (even in Quebec). From Apple's *Soundtrack* to stock library cues, there is no shortage of cheaper music from other sources. We all need to share our experiences through our representative organizations. We also need to dialogue constructively with producers keeping in mind that independent producers are not covered by GCFC Certification. The GCFC discussion list is a great place to do that: gfcf_discuss@list.goodemdia.ca.

The opinions in this article are strictly those of the authors, and do not reflect those of the Guild of Canadian Film Composers.

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