



Hollywood record producer Robert Townson: 'The defensiveness about film music has always bothered me.'

(MATTHEW JOSEPH PEAK)

A prodigy in the recording studio

SAVING SCREEN GEMS / With 400 recordings to his credit at the age of 31, Ontario-born Robert Townson is already Hollywood's premiere producer of movie-soundtrack recordings.

BY GERALD LEVITCH
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HOLLYWOOD is notorious for shredding its history and trashing old films when some executive thinks they aren't earning their keep any more. If the archives and old scripts were so much waste paper, then it's hardly surprising to discover that MGM, in 1963, filled up a landfill site with manuscripts, master tapes, orchestral scores and parts, and literally bulldozed it all to free up warehouse storage space.

Robert Townson is struggling to repair the damage and restore dozens, even hundreds, of soundtrack scores that have been essentially "lost." Born in Whitby, Ont., the 31-year-old Townson is the leading producer of movie-soundtrack recordings in Hollywood. "Rerecording the classics of film music is my mission," Townson said in an interview from his office at Varèse Sarabande Records on Ventura Boulevard in Studio City, between CBS Studios and Universal Pictures.

Townson arranged the distribution for his first two albums through Varèse Sarabande, a Los Angeles-based record company specializing in movie-soundtrack recordings. Within two years, he had moved to L.A. and signed a production agreement with Varèse Sarabande, and by May of 1989 had taken over all production activities for the label's releases. Now he is a vice-president at the company.

Harry Garfield, US's senior vice-president for music, calls Townson "the most prolific independent producer of movie-music soundtrack albums in the world. He's a friend of film music who's motivated by the music, not by the money. There's nobody else like Bob. He's a purist."

Yet Townson described himself as just an ordinary, small-town Ontario 11-year-old when he first saw *Star Wars* "and was blown away by the sound of a symphony orchestra playing John Williams." That experience led him to look into more works by Williams, and by Jerry Goldsmith (who composed the music for *Patton*, *The Omen* and hundreds of other movies during the 1970s and 80s). Their music, in turn, was a bridge leading to classical music by the likes of Beethoven, Dvorak and Prokofiev. But he never lost his first love: film music.

"I was a fan whose passion for the music grew stronger, and I realized that there were aspects of the film-music market that weren't being properly taken advantage of," he said. "Scores were written that weren't being issued as soundtracks. It was 1985, and Elmer Bernstein [composer of *A Walk on the Wild Side* and dozens of other scores] had gone five years without having an album released."

Frustrated that nobody was issuing all this music and convinced that a market for it existed, he decided to do it himself. "And, being 19, I didn't know enough to know better."

He also took advantage of the distance between Whitby and Hollywood. "Over the phone, nobody could tell how old I was." He fearlessly called composer Jerry Goldsmith and arranged for the rights to issue his

score for *Final Conflict*, the third *Omen* film (the first in the series won Goldsmith an Oscar for his score in 1976). Family loans covered the \$30,000 cost. Fortunately, the record sold well enough to recover its expenses and even turn a profit, "which allowed for another one, which in turn allowed for yet another."

Four hundred albums later, Townson has just issued the soundtrack to *Air Force One*, composed, again, by Jerry Goldsmith. Townson, now based in Los Angeles, is undertaking a massive project to rerecord the complete scores of several key film-music composers, including Alex North, Bernard Herrmann, Elmer Bernstein and Goldsmith. The new series commemorates Varèse Sarabande's 20th anniversary. Townson produces definitive modern recordings of works that have been heard previously only in edited or highly truncated versions, or not at all, as in the case of the legendary "lost" score by Alex North for Stan-

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ley Kubrick's *2001* (Varèse Sarabande VSD-5400).

And thereby hangs a tale. During the 1980s, Townson became friends with the ailing composer. "It meant a lot to Alex that a 25-year-old was so involved and respectful of his work," Townson said. Townson proposed that North's music, which had been rejected by Kubrick in favour of an assortment of classical-music warhorses, from Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* to Johann Strauss's *The Blue Danube*, finally be presented to the world in a new, complete recording. North died in 1991, before the project was completed, but it serves as a fitting tribute to one of Hollywood's most influential composers.

The New York-born North introduced the sound of jazz to Hollywood-movie scores in his music for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Traces of his musical education with the German modernist Ernest Toch, and that most American of composers, Aaron Copland, appear in his *2001* score, with its dissonant evocation of the vastness and hostility of space. It was Kubrick's decision, but it's hard not to suspect that the film would have been a very different experience with the New World American sound of North, instead of the Old World European composers that Kubrick actually used.

Producing an album such as North's *2001* score involves a surprising range of activities. As Townson explains his job, it includes "everything, from conceptualizing a project to selecting the orchestra, the con-

ductor, supervising the recording sessions, overseeing the packaging and commissioning original art."

In some cases, it also requires detective work to track down the music after years of neglect, which is how many of the greatest scores have come to be designated as "lost."

For example, Townson was working with Jerry Goldsmith to produce a new recording of Goldsmith's landmark score for *Patton*. "Jerry thought all the manuscript materials were over at 20th Century Fox. But when we called over, we learned that Fox had literally thrown away all the music for their pictures prior to 1985. The same thing happened when we tried to record Elmer Bernstein's *The Great Escape*. It required a complete reconstruction from Elmer's own sketches." *Patton* was lost, and so was the score for *The Sand Pebbles* and *Tora Tora Tora*. All had to be reconstructed from the music cues remaining on the film's soundtrack.

Unlike the studios, Townson has no doubts about the value of the music he is preserving. "The defensiveness about film music has always bothered me," he said. "Sure, the bulk of the work in its day was largely uninspired or unexemplary. It takes the acid of time to burn away the dross, the mediocrities. But afterward, what survives is music that's wonderful music in its own right."

"We're living in different times now. It's okay for Esa-Pekka Salonen and the L.A. Philharmonic to record Bernard Herrmann [Sony Classical SK 62700], or schedule a piece by Jerry Goldsmith on a concert program alongside Shostakovich and Copland next April."

The economics of the recording marketplace justify Townson's efforts. Not all his hundreds of discs are bestsellers, but nearly every title sells at least 5,000 copies, while most hit the 10,000 to 30,000 range. The Goldsmith score for Sean Connery's *Medicine Man* (VSD-5350) sold about 100,000 copies, while Goldsmith's eerie score for *Basic Instinct* (VSD-5360) surpassed that figure.

These are impressive numbers for original instrumental music that is symphonic in nature, and it far exceeds typical classical-record sales. The secret is its younger audience. "Film music sells to mid-teen-agers, as well as middle-aged fans. Through the movies, it makes contact with younger people."

That's encouraging to Townson, although — with his enthusiasm — he seems to require little encouragement. "The task is daunting, but there's a large body of work that I feel extremely passionate about, such as all of the Alex North recordings and at least 20 additional scores, including *The Misfits*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, *Viva Zapata!*, *The Rainmaker*, *The Bad Seed* — the list just goes on. And I'm really just getting started with Bernard Herrmann. And after that, more Georges Delerue, and Nino Rota, Victor Young and Franz Waxman."

And after all those film scores, he said, without pause, "There's always the next 400."