

## **THE DYING ART OF THEME MUSIC**

*THEME SONGS USED TO SUM UP THEIR SHOWS IN 90 SECONDS TODAY, 'UGLY BETTY' THEME IS 11 SECONDS*

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By William Weir

Courant Staff Writer

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Schlemiel! Schlimazel!

Having read those two words, you'll have that "Laverne & Shirley" song in your head for the rest of the day. You're welcome.

A song that can instantly make you think of a rather middling sitcom decades after its demise seems a solid testament to the power of TV theme music. Even though you don't hear theme songs as much on prime time anymore, the TV theme has proved a remarkably resilient thing. These days, it lives on at the far reaches of your remote. Cartoons, Spanish-language stations and premium cable shows all show a love of a good opening ditty. There are even home-made, fake title sequences on YouTube created by viewers honoring their favorite shows.

So, obviously, people like TV themes. Why don't network executives? They've been trying to kill them off since the 1990s, when "Seinfeld" opened with a funky -- but very quick -- bass line.

Bob Thompson, professor of media and popular culture at Syracuse University, blames it on network consultants fretting over viewers' itchy remote fingers.

"The idea was that you had to immediately close in your audience like quicksand, and a theme song that would provide nothing new was an invitation to check out other channels," Thompson says.

Oddly, though, the TV theme seems designed specifically for short attention spans. Super-catchy songs would pithily sum up the show, either directly ("Here's the story/ Of a man named Brady"), or indirectly ("Your job's a joke, you're broke, your love life's DOA"). You were brought up to speed in 60 to 90 seconds.

Now, TV themes go by in a flash.

Take, for instance, the theme of "Ugly Betty." Chipper and jaunty, it fits the show perfectly, but it's only 11 seconds long. Emmy-winning composer Jeff Beal, who wrote it, has mixed feelings about compliments he gets for it. On the one hand, it's great that you like it. But it's only 11 seconds long.

Not that he's against micro-compositions; They're an interesting challenge. "Music has a beginning, a middle and an end," he says, and a few seconds isn't much time to get the idea across.

But he's glad for the chance to work with HBO, where he wrote the exotic-sounding theme to "Rome." It's longer than a minute and half - - epic length in TV terms. He hopes that new technology, like TiVo, will help ease networks' "fear of the clicker."

"I think they're making a mistake," he says of programmers' decision to downplay theme music. "Over time, those pieces tend to serve as an element to which the audience is attached and bonded to the show."

These songs also provide cultural reference points. Whistle "The Andy Griffith Show" theme, and the whole world (or at least anyone in earshot) whistles with you. Something freaky happens, you do the theme from the "Twilight Zone." Your colleagues' workspaces are looking like a junk yard? Hum a few bars of "Sanford & Son," and they'll get the hint. Your friend walks into the room: "And then there's Maude!" (Works only if your friend is named Maude.)

And nothing says "1970s kitsch" like pointing with both hands like Isaac the Bartender and singing a few bars of "Love, exciting and new/ Come aboard/ We're expecting you!"

By the way, the "Sanford & Son" music rocks. As TV theme aficionados will point out, Quincy Jones wrote it. Which is the other thing -- some TV themes are just great music on their own. The themes to "SWAT," "Hawaii Five-0" and "Welcome Back, Kotter" climbed high on the Billboard charts. You probably remember the song "Believe It or Not" better than the show that provided it ("Greatest American Hero").

And who doesn't like the "Cheers" theme? Well, a lot of people, actually. That's another plus about these songs -- just mention the topic, and you'll have a small crowd arguing over what the best all-time theme is. Soon, debaters will break things down to categories ("Best song sung by the actors?" "Fresh Prince." "No! `All in the Family!").

Sometimes, shows introduce us to good, older songs. "That '70s Show" began with "In the Street," originally recorded by Big Star in the 1970s (re-recorded for the show by Cheap Trick), and "The Drew Carey Show" started with the 1979 Ian Hunter song "Cleveland Rocks," performed by the Presidents of the United States of America. The "CSI" shows get no points for their use of the Who's songs, which are already overplayed on the radio.

(FYI, many think the "Friends" song existed before the show, but it was written specifically as its theme. It was the Rembrandts' only big hit.)

It's a unique art, and one that doesn't always get respect. Stratford songwriter Melissa Mulligan describes a bad song on the radio with the withering assessment, "Sounds like a TV theme." But she gives the craft its due, saying a good theme "must be incredibly difficult to write."

"You have to write something that is so catchy, it sticks like glue to the brain but doesn't make the viewer want to throw the remote at the TV upon hearing it," she says in an e-mail.

And there's no need to relegate the TV theme to nostalgia. There's still good stuff out there.

On premium cable, you have the aforementioned "Rome," which was nominated for an Emmy last year. Showtime's "Masters of Horror" won the Emmy last year and boasts some effectively creepy music. "Weeds" and "The Wire" both used older songs (the folkie classic "Little Boxes" and Tom Waits' "Way Down in the Hole," respectively), but commissioned well-known artists to record new versions.

Cartoons also do well by the theme. "The Simpsons," "Family Guy" and "South Park" have some of the most infectious intros on TV. The Cartoon Network had two of its themes nominated for Emmys in 2005.

The old-fashioned TV theme still rides high on Spanish-language channels. "La Fea Mas Bella" -- the model for "Ugly Betty" -- treats viewers to a bouncy 92-second song. Its close rival, "Destilando Amor," starts with a 2-minute-plus production.

Intro songs also play big on stations aimed at kids, like Nickelodeon and Disney Channel ("That's So Raven" and "Get Ed" are popular). Thompson figures that's the stations' way of appealing to parents -- give 'em something catchy, and they don't mind the TV being tuned to Disney all day.

And then there's the curious phenomenon of regular folks uploading on YouTube their own television title sequences. The most popular subject of the faux title sequence is "Lost," which in proper form has no theme outside of a brief hum while the word "Lost" floats on the screen.

This may be a simple case of people with way too much time on their hands, or it could be symptomatic of a psychological void left by the absence of a theme song.

In either case, Beal is both amused and encouraged to hear of this.

"People are taking matters into their own hands."