

Collaborative Competition

An inside look at the NYU/ASCAP Foundation Film Scoring Workshop.

By Jeffrey DiLucca



This year marked the 10th annual NYU/ASCAP Foundation Film Scoring Workshop in memory of the late Walt Disney Studios composer, Buddy Baker. A stellar composer with outstanding film credits such as *The Fox and the Hound*, *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, and a grammar school favorite of many a music major, *Donald in Mathmagic Land*, Baker gave back to the industry by starting the film scoring program at the University of Southern California and initiating the annual NYU/ASCAP workshop with New York University film scoring program director, Dr. Ron Sadoff.

Each year the workshop brings together film and television's top composers, music editors, and recording engineers to work with and guide young composers who are passionate about learning the craft of film scoring. Iconic composer Ira Newborn, best known for his work on *The Naked Gun* films and his numerous collaborations with director John Hughes, returned to participate as a panelist, as did *Lord of the Rings* music editor Tim Starnes. Composer Mark Snow (*Ghost Whisperer*, *Smallville*, *The X-Files*) returned as well to coach and critique the participating members of the workshop.

Ron Sadoff has succeeded in carrying the torch of Buddy's bright and humble spirit into the hands of today's world of up and coming film composers. "I first met Buddy Baker in 1990 at a spin-off event of the Film Music Society's annual symposium for individuals who taught film music classes throughout America," Sadoff said. The two men built a relationship over the years, and in 2000, at Buddy's suggestion, they jointly ran the first NYU/Buddy Baker film scoring

workshop, in which Buddy took the pedagogical helm. Sadoff suggested presenting the workshop on a somewhat larger scale than had taken place at some of Baker's previous workshops around the country: firstly, having the workshop last over a period of several days; secondly, using a total of 15 orchestral players.

From the very beginning Ron knew that Buddy's personality was unique. Coming from the Disney studio environment, Baker approached things without ego, which carried over into the work he did with the students participating in the workshop at NYU. Ron commented that Buddy was responsible for re-creating an air of "collaborative competition," a form of competition in which the students are not aiming to overpower one another, but rather feed off of each other's energy and ideas to strengthen their individual compositional voices.

In the second year, with the interest and help of Sue Devine, Senior Director of Film and Television at ASCAP, the three joined forces. Since that time, Sue and ASCAP have played a major role, connecting the workshop with composers Elliot Goldenthal, Carter Burwell, Dan Foliart, Bruce Broughton, and director/music supervisor Alex Steyermark, to name a few. The workshop has also taken on formalized standards and procedures of an industrialized scoring session. To this day, NYU is one of the few schools that has the proper equipment to accurately simulate the recording standards of a Hollywood scoring session.

Ira Newborn joined the workshop in May of 2005, when he reached out to Sadoff asking to participate. Newborn returned to his original home of New York when he retired from Hollywood. He enjoys helping young composers learn how to communicate with directors and read the picture, offering them un-sugarcoated advice on the way the industry works. After his integral contribution in 2005, Newborn was asked to join the film scoring faculty at NYU and continues to teach there today.



Helping Hands: Mark Snow (left) and Ira Newborn.

Mark Snow commented on the importance and uniqueness of the workshop: “I think that what’s most important is that there is more than one right way to put music to picture.” He stresses that different composers can take a variety of different approaches effectively. Snow provided an example of a comedy cue from *Bruce Almighty*, which was one of this year’s clips. Mark noted that the American students took a “Carl Stalling approach,” which was very mercurial and busy; whereas some European participants did something entirely different with a slower tempo. “Both approaches worked wonderfully,” Mark said.

Snow enjoys participating as a panelist, because it gives him an opportunity to get out of the cave of the studio and mingle with others in the industry. He feels that another crucial aspect is that there is “a sense of reality about the workshop.” Professionals who have scored for years have a sense of communicating to the students what it’s like in the “real world.” Snow is currently working on the French psychological thriller *The Hunters*.

“I’m happy to say ‘it arrived’ this year,” Sadoff says of the 2010 workshop, which has undergone a series of evolutions over the years. The 10-day workshop involves a rich and broad itinerary. “We’re a little bit different [from other workshops] in that the concentration is on the process of each area,” he continues. The format of the program follows a highly balanced structure. First, the participants and auditors of the workshop meet each other, followed by an opening seminar formally introducing the panelists and presenters. Subsequent days are filled with undertaking an in-depth visual analysis of the cues to be scored, followed by a presentation and group discussion of various mock-ups which have been prepared by the participants. These mock-ups are then dissected by the participating

panelists and various issues are diagnosed.

“We were lucky to have Bruce Broughton, who spearheaded the workshop for the first three days,” Sadoff comments. “And this is one of the rare composers that have come out of Hollywood. He is a superb diagnostician. He has this background of experience that is just remarkably broad. When he looks at music with picture he takes everything into account. It’s what Ira Newborn calls ‘the gestalt approach,’ where you’re not just looking at one thing. There’s this myriad of things that feed into why you’re doing the music you’re doing for a certain scene. Bruce is a master at that, and so was a fantastic way to open up the first three days.”



On the Big Screen: Bruce Broughton passes on his knowledge.

Most of the evenings are dedicated solely to allow the composers time to work on their cues. Sue Devine has also introduced a few nights when ASCAP holds special presentations in NYU’s Loewe Theatre in which members of The Society of Composers & Lyricists give lectures, display their work, and answer audience questions.

Another of the strongest features of the workshop involved film music editor Tim Starnes, a regular collaborator with Howard Shore and a faculty member with NYU’s film scoring program, presenting a soup-to-nuts, day-long course on the music editing process. Starnes brought in examples from his work on the *Lord of the Rings* films, such as sequencer mock ups, cue logs and picture edit logs to show the participants examples of what it’s like for a film music editor to manage work from a full-length feature. Most important, perhaps, is the enlightenment he provided the participants on the construction of the click track. Starnes helps students prepare so that technical issues do not become a barrier for them while trying to tell the story through music, allowing them to concentrate on the artistic

side.

Later in the workshop, Starnes worked with each composer individually to secure the timing of his or her cue to ensure that every piece would be on the click for the recording session. Starnes offered advice on making the right musical choices, from the perspective of a well-seasoned music editor's perspective. Since he acts as liaison between the director and film editor to address technical issues on behalf of the composer, Starnes has a unique vantage point that allows him to identify what flies with a director. Next month, Starnes will begin working with Howard Shore on a new feature film entitled *London Boulevard*.

The Buddy Baker workshop also offers an orchestration day in which some of the finest orchestrators in the industry spread out around various spots in the Loewe Theatre to offer advice on their craft. The participants rotate through the various orchestrators to get a wide variety of suggestions from which to choose and color their cues. Sadoff implemented orchestration day after the initial start of the workshop, and has noted the payoff as being very beneficial to the participants, because of the varying perspectives and the chance to avoid technical issues during the recording session—precisely the skills one needs to be a professional film composer or orchestrator.

Orchestrators have included Ira Newborn, Sonny Kompanek, Michael Patterson and Deniz Hughes. Newborn offers a tremendous wealth of experience to the participants. Being one of the most iconic film composers of the '80s and '90s, he has had experience composing in every orchestrational style imaginable. This, he noted, is a necessity for scoring comedy, which he regards as “the hardest job.” Aside from his orchestration and industry advice, he strongly recommends that “the most important thing the participants in the workshop, and all musicians, should learn are the words to the song, ‘Never Smile at a Crocodile’ from *Peter Pan*.”

Before the recording session, each composer gets a trial run to conduct their cue with a rehearsal pianist and the click track created in the music editing session with Starnes. The second-to-last day is an eight-hour recording session, in which each composer records his or her cue. The composers can choose either to conduct or have one of the workshop panelists conduct the cue. Recording engineer Jim Anderson, a veteran of the workshops, participated again this year, doing a live mix and preparing the participants' demos for the final critique the next day.

The workshop has grown over the years, adding more acclaimed composers to its list of pedagogues, and accepting qualified applicants from all over the world. “This year,” Sadoff was thrilled to say, “marked the second year with a participant under the age of 18!” Sadoff's aim is for the program to continue blossoming and offering a stimulating, informative and collaborative environment for composers

who wish to score to picture.

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