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The Magic in the Music of Disney

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The Magic in the Music of Disney

Disney has been a very powerful and influential franchise over the past several decades. There are many people who know of their films and music. The theme parks are highly visited and is a dream destination for occasions ranging from students' graduation presents to couples' honeymoons. The atmosphere in the parks is unique, thanks to Disney's imagination. Many of the attractions at those theme parks are based on the films that Disney has created. The films are successful in the sense that many have been named, "Disney classics," and have music in them that is very popular. Since the late twentieth century, Disney has been making some of the highest grossing films. Disney currently has the fifth highest grossing film of all time, which is "Frozen." Companies such as Universal Studios cannot be dismissed when discussing successful film industries, however, none can quite compare to the immense success of Disney. How does one franchise have so much success that its films are "an important part of many children's viewing experience worldwide?"¹ Walt Disney created a film industry that has captivated people of all ages for years, and the main reason for the franchise's success is its music.

The music of Disney has purpose. It is intentional, and it always has been. The music is also thematic, giving audiences an idea of what to feel and a distinction between films. These are two reasons in which Disney music has become so successful. However, it is Walt Disney's imagination and way of doing things that need to be discussed first. Without his creativity, the intentional and thematic music in which so many people love would not be in existence the way it is today.

¹ David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* (Aldershot, Eng., Ashgate, 2008)

Since the beginning, Walt Disney had a vision for his films. He was a sketch artist and a voice actor himself, so he knew what kind of talent he needed in his studios. He wasn't merely going with the flow of the industry. His creations were a mixture of his original ideas and inspiration from others in and out of the same profession. "It is clear that Disney's films were the result of a shrewd mixture of his own personal intuition and the more scholarly culture of some of his collaborators, all of it supported by solid documentary tools-the library, film viewings-and continuous in-house training for artists on the studio premises."² He had a team to help him make his imagination come to life. It wasn't solely Walt thinking up every idea. He said it himself, in the early sixties: "You know, I was stumped one day when a little boy asked, 'Do you draw Mickey Mouse?' I had to admit I do not draw any more. 'Then you think up all the jokes and ideas?' 'No,' I said, 'I don't do that.' Finally, he looked at me and said: 'Mr. Disney, just what do you do?' 'Well,' I said, 'sometimes I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the Studio to another and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody. I guess that's the job I do.'"² This quote describes a lot of what Disney did in every aspect of his career. He created an innovative and welcoming atmosphere for everyone. He was not concerned with how things were, but with how things ought to be. In the book, "Realityland", by David Koenig, who spent ten years interviewing over 200 employees, or "cast members", of Walt Disney World, it says, "Here, everybody introduced themselves by first name only, a practice insisted on by Walt to promote friendliness. They also learned that, to maintain the illusion that this was all a show, they were to use the terminology of show business. They were cast members, not employees, wearing costumes, not uniforms, serving guests, not customers. The audience, not crowd,

² *Once Upon a Time: Walt Disney, the Sources for inspiration for the Disney Studios* (Munich: Prestel, 2006), 26.

³ David Koenig, *Realityland: True-Life Adventures at Walt Disney World* (Irvine, CA: Bonaventure Press, 2007), 203.

enjoyed attractions and adventures, not rides.”³ Walt had a vision-for his music, his films, his parks-and he has kept it alive by instilling his way of viewing and doing things in his studios.

Walt Disney joined the army at the young age of sixteen, after attending the Fine Arts Academy in Chicago. After coming back from the army, he moved out of his parents’ home because they were not supportive of Disney’s desire to make art his career. So, he got a job at Kansas City Film Ad Compan³y, which was the start of cartoon animation for him. Daisy Disney, Walt’s daughter, explains Disney’s strong desire to be different and creative. At this point, Disney was at his job at the Kansas City Film Ad Company.

“The art manager gave Father a photograph of a fedora hat. Under it Father was supposed to draw a face so he drew a character with an electric-light-bulb nose and a silly grin. The art manager didn’t see the completed job until he viewed it on the screen. When Father’s fedora wearer appeared, the big boss let out a wild “Haw haw” and said, ‘Thank God we’ve got something new around here for a change. I’m sick of those pretty boys we’ve been showing.’”⁴

Disney was a strong-willed, creative individual, with a lot of early experience in the world of art. He loved music and his love for art really fueled his film-making industry. Without his strong passion for the arts from his early ages, there might have never been an industry so successful in helping people escape reality and enter into such a magical world of film and music.

From the very beginning of his career in cartoon making, Disney had an idea about how music was going to affect and play a role in his films. The first idea we will discuss is that the music is purposeful. To quote David Tietyen,, author of “The Musical World of Walt Disney”:
“Disney never imagined taking the easy way out. That’s certainly in my opinion one of the secrets of his success. Never to leave a thing until it had been milked in every possible way, and working it out in the best possible manner no matter how much time it took or how much money

4 Daisy Disney Miller, *The Story of Walt Disney* (New York: Holt, 1957), 60.

it cost. He built his pictures that way.” David Tietyen, also says, “Disney was extremely concerned that sound and music were an integral part of his productions and that the synchronization of sound and action was perfect.” Films made in the Disney studios have never been taken lightly. Walt Disney made sure to promote precision in all of his films, resulting in huge successes. The Band Concert, which is the first colored Mickey Mouse cartoon, got “raving reviews”, says Tietyen. Otis Ferguson commented on the film saying: “The Band Concert is a good reminder that the musical staff at work on the cartoons always seem to be well out front of other musical staffs in the industry. I do not mean for the mere synchronization and recording of sound, but for making sound a natural and basic part of the production, for originating scores and for putting them over with good orchestral swing and nice handling of the vocal work-trios, choruses, whatever. The music is light, but often fetching and always adequate, its function well understood.” In this clip, it’s easy to see how the music truly brings the animation to life.

(SHOW CLIP) This cartoon, which came out in 1935, was just the beginning of this success story. Bambi, another film Disney worked on personally, came out seven years later, and the synchronization of music and action is still very obvious. In this clip of Bambi, the music being played by the orchestra is lined up exactly with the movement of the raindrops and of the nature, in general. (SHOW CLIP) Even after Disney passed away, the way of doing things was well-cemented into the studio that it was like Walt was still around. Aristocats, which came out 4 years after his death, shows a lot of the same ideas of precise sound and action synchronization. In this clip, it is plain to see the different sounds lining up with the movement and the music lining up with the motions, as well. (SHOW CLIP) So, the music moves the scenes in the film to a purposeful beat, making each song recognizable. There is always something to vividly picture when listening to Disney music, whether it be plates dancing around in “Beauty and the Beast”

or Ariel contemplating her life as she wishfully stares at the shore in “The Little Mermaid.”

Every note, every rhythm, every lyrics is made to fit the animation perfectly, and it helps peoples’ imaginations soar right along with the creators’.

Not only is the music intentional, but it is also thematic. In order for Disney to be successful, it had to, and still has to keep creating films that present new ideas and new material.

In the book “The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation,” author David Whitley states,

“Disney’s single most impressive achievement in the history of the animated film was arguably to demonstrate the commercial and artistic viability of the animated feature. The transition from short cartoon to feature length animation was not simply a question of expansion in terms of running time however. In order to develop themes and plotlines with the capacity to enthrall audiences over more substantial periods, new elements had to be brought in to extend the range of the gags and quick-fire comedy that had been the essence of the cartoon short. In a sense, a whole new kind of narrative had to be evolved, with a different focus and set of thematic concerns to those that had prevailed previously.”⁴

New themes needed to be presented in order for people to really catch on to the films and be intrigued by them. Something that Disney instilled into the studios was the idea of thematic music. For example, *Bambi* had a theme revolving around the conflict between nature and humans. So, the studio had to come up with music that fit that theme well. The music brings to life the nature that is portrayed in the film to make you really feel something when the humans start to make conflict arise. Another example is “*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.” The music composed for that movie was not happy and light like the music in, say, “*Snow White*.” The music needed to fit the time period and the setting. So you hear Gregorian chants and big bells ringing to imitate the actual bells of Notre Dame. The Disney studio composes music that fits the

⁴ Whitley, David. *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*. Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2008.

films; makes sense to be in the film. Therefore, Disney music cannot fit a mold. Each film has distinct music.

In conclusion, Walt Disney created a film industry that has touched the lives of people of all ages for years, and the main reason for this is the music. To quote David Tietyen once more, “Walt Disney was not a musician, he was a cartoonist. In fact, from all reports, he had no formal music education. Yet, the music and songs that flowed from his studio have become a part of our American heritage. These are songs that evoke fond childhood memories—memories of being caught up in the magical fantasies created by Disney. His music was cheerful, carrying a message of hope; appealing to all generations with a universal theme that life has much to offer. Disney’s films were not children’s films but they touched the child in all of us. As one Disney songwriter commented, ‘His most successful films had heart. There was always something in them that would reach out and touch one of our human emotions. This is what Walt added to each film he was personally involved with.’”

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