

## **Kathryn Hill**

### **Music, subtexts and foreshadowings: contextual roles of popular music in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2003.**

It is the job of Jonathon King, music supervisor for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to find appropriate music to feature on the show. As well as the indie artists that have appeared live, the music of some hundred and seventy artists, features prominently in the soundtrack. But as King states, he does not just 'needle-drop' popular hits:

The songs have to fit the scene. A lot of TV shows will tend to just take the biggest hit they can and just needle-drop it into the show wherever they can and crank it up really loud. So it's almost like, 'Okay, here's story, story, story, and now a hit song by Third Eye Blind. A lot of shows are doing that now and it's not really a trend that we started, but it's kind of something that I think *Buffy* had made popular (King quoted in Holder, 2000, p.438).

*Buffy*'s creator and producer, Joss Whedon, clearly wanted to use popular music in a more purposeful way. As he comments in his sleeve notes to the CD, *Radio Sunnydale*, the compilation of artists used on *Buffy* from seasons 5 to 7: "A lot of shows that involve teenagers use songs to the point of abuse – 'Pass the salt' means 'Cue pointless montage to accommodate hit song and lack of plot'. *Buffy* never worked that way" (Whedon, 2003b). For Whedon it was important to integrate popular music into the narrative. This integration is so complete, that as King (quoted in Holder, 2000, p.438) notes, "[popular] music has become another character" but not a character that distracts from the story. King elaborates on this in an interview for *The Official 2002 Buffy Yearbook*:

Using source music on TV without distracting the viewer from the onscreen action is a bit of an art in itself...The secret to it is paying attention to the scene and recognizing subtext. The music should not bring too much attention to itself – not take you out of the moment, but pull you deeper into it. It should evoke a certain mood, but doesn't necessarily have to be dead on. I try to use music to enhance a

scene or a moment realistically – not showcase the latest hit single (Francis, 2002, p.62).  
Writers on film music (Smith, 1998, p.171) (Kassabian, 2001) (Evans, 1975, p.195)

observe the tight structure of visual storytelling in film limits the uses of popular music as a narrative device. As Kassabian observes:

Pop song cues match visual tracks quite easily at their entrances, but very rarely do they continue to match tightly. While such sequences could, for example, use music-video-style rhythmic visual editing, or could structure a sequence precisely to follow musical structure or lyrics, such breaks with continuity editing are rarely permitted. Because continuity editing is so inviolable, pop soundtracks have an aleatory quality – the songs have only a very loose fit with the visuals. (Kassabian, 2001, p.80).

The following comment by David Greenwalt (quoted in Hollywood Reporter, 1999), executive producer of *Buffy*, and later of the spinoff series *Angel*, supports Kassabian's observations.:

When we started *Buffy*, we thought we'd have all these cool montages with music like all the other shows. But the pace and structure of our shows don't lend themselves to a lot of needle drops. We're big on scoring.

Clearly the use of popular music in *Buffy* cannot replace a traditionally composed film score "timed and edited to fit the editing rhythms and movements within the frame" (Smith, 1998, p.10). Whedon and his music supervisor, John King, have therefore devised a far more devious level of song utilisation: Whedon still uses popular song as a narrative device, but one which does not rely on visual continuity apart from the briefest of entrance cues. King acknowledges that the writers often play a part in the music selection process. According to King (quoted in Francis, 2002, p.62):

Every now and then Joss has a specific song or band he would like to feature, and sometimes the writers will make suggestions in their scripts, but for the most part it's usually a general music description like 'loud music plays' or 'really sad song'. They tend to leave me alone to do my thing. However, if there's a track in an

episode that they think doesn't quite gel, they will usually attempt to steer me in the right direction by way of cryptic editorial notes.

The writers are not the only ones giving cryptic directions. Comments by King such as: "The secret to it is paying attention to the scene and recognizing subtext" (Francis, 2002, p.62) or "I get a script and think, what would this character listen to in this particular instance? I figure out the subtext." (Ostrow, 2000, p.13) are hinting at the incorporation of a layer of meaning within the popular music soundtrack, which may not be evident on the surface.

In his study of the use of popular music in film *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* Jeff Smith discusses a use of popular music he terms 'allusionism' (Smith, 1998, p.167). Adapted from Noël Carroll's essay "The Future of Allusion" (1982) allusionism in film theory was originally used to describe the process by which filmmakers in the sixties and seventies made visual allusion to film history as an expressive device. As Smith observes (Smith, 1998, p.167):

This...involved not only quotations and homages to classic films but also the reworking of genres and the recreation of famous shots, scenes, plot patterns, and themes of canonical Hollywood films. [This practice] does not negate a general audience's understanding of the film's use of genre conventions, but rather enriches the film's expressive qualities for an informed viewer.

Smith has found filmmakers in the late 1960s and 70s, who grew up listening to rock'n'roll, such as Martin Scorsese *Mean Streets* (1973), Lawrence Kasdan *The Big Chill* (1983), Peter Bogdanovich *The Last Picture Show* and in particular George Lucas *American Graffiti* (1973) often utilise the allusionist possibilities of popular music in their films:

Allusions to pop music function in much the same manner as the system described by Carroll. On one level, an audience of uninformed viewers may interpret the song as background music pure and simple. As such, they may make judgments regarding the overall style and its appropriateness to considerations of setting, character, and mood. However, an audience of informed viewers will recognise the song's titles, lyrics, or performer, and will apply this knowledge to the dramatic context depicted onscreen. In such a way, musical allusion also serves as an expressive device to either comment on the action or suggest the director's attitude toward the characters, settings, and themes of the film.

What I wish to do is make a case for the allusionist use of popular music in *Buffy* by establishing a historical precedence in the work of these earlier film makers: in particular George Lucas and his homage to the early 1960s, *American Graffiti* (1973). In writing the script to *American Graffiti* Lucas crafted each scene, each lasting around two and a half minutes, around one of forty-two hits of the era. As Lucas (Lucas, 2003) states:

I would select a piece of music for each scene... I had a big rock'n'roll library from when I was in high school... I would pick a particular song... and write the scene to this song. So there was a very, very strong relationship to the song and the scene that was written to go with that song.

As a result the soundtrack is integrated into the narrative, commenting on character development, the storyline and foreshadowing events. As Smith (Smith, 1998, p.176) observes:

The song over the opening credits, "Rock Around the Clock," comically foreshadows this temporal structure by summarizing a twelve-hour period during which the song's narrator will "rock, rock, rock 'til broad daylight." Similarly, the music during the closing credits, "All Summer Long," serves to highlight the film's story time by ironically commenting on summer's end. In it, the song's narrator wistfully remembers the fun of the passing summer, but also cautions that "[It] won't be long till summertime is through." The tune is not only a fitting comment on the film's plot, which is set on the last night of the summer of 1962, but it extends a seasonal metaphor in the film which symbolizes the protagonists' growth out of adolescence and into adulthood.

Scripting *American Graffiti* in this way Lucas became the first music supervisor. Now a very important role for many films and television.

If one were to make a case for the allusionist use of popular music in *Buffy* who is Whedon's audience of informed viewers? The soundtrack to *American Graffiti* consists of many familiar pieces of popular music. For example the use of 'Why Do Fools Fall in Love' as Kurt (Richard Dreyfuss) first sees the mysterious blond in the white T-Bird needs no explanation. In contrast only someone willing to make the effort can find out what songs are featured on the soundtrack to *Buffy*. In other words possibly Whedon supplies musical subtexts because he wants to award to dedicated fans. Lists of the featured artists and song titles used on *Buffy* can be located at various Internet sites. Leslie Remencus' beautifully crafted *Buffy and Angel Music Pages*, which has ceased, was the principal source for this study. Remencus included record covers, song lyrics and, where available, direct links to musicians' online homepages. The lyrics of many of the songs used on *Buffy* are indecipherable behind other aural layers, such as conversation. Sometimes, the lyrics of songs may not be heard at all if, for example, only an instrumental excerpt of a song is used on screen. If one knows the lyrics to featured songs, closely follows the visuals and script on the screen, contextual links can be found between song lyrics and narrative. In other words, based on a fan's familiarity with the over-arching narrative of *Buffy*, and the show's character development, many song lyrics offer commentaries on events within the story and foreshadow future events.

In personal correspondence with music supervisor Jonathon King, (King, April 2004) he acknowledges songs establish atmosphere for a particular scene "For the most part I do try to find a song that works both musically and lyrically without being too "on the mark" as that lends itself to the element of melodrama and "cheese."

But he denies lyrics ever supply a commentary or subtext: “I look for a song that just basically sums up the atmosphere in a particular setting or scene musically with no regard to what the lyrics are saying (unless they are extremely off the mark)” My observations are therefore subjective and time limitations necessitate they be brief.

The beginning for seasons five, six and seven, and possible four, all feature songs that comment on the narrative arch for that season. At the beginning of this paper I played two scenes from season five: Buffy and Riley playing on the beach in ‘Buffy versus Dracula’ (5.01) and Buffy talking to Xander in ‘I was made to love you’. In the beach scene rock band Vertical Horizon’s ‘Finding Me’ appears to be just happy background music for teenage frolics on a sunny Californian beach. But if you follow the lyrics carefully you will see they may be a commentary on Buffy’s deteriorating relationship with Riley in this season as well as her growing understanding of herself and her true nature. The theme of the 5<sup>th</sup> season is Buffy finding out about herself, who she is, her purpose of her life, in other words, her destiny. The entire season is a slow unfolding of Buffy coming to realise her fate. Boyfriends are just getting in the way of this journey of discovery as the lyrics suggest when Buffy hits Riley with the ball:

I know that this is  
Deeper than you get.  
But you’re coming back again  
You don’t mean to waste my time...

The next verse is not featured in this scene but elaborates upon these central themes of the 5<sup>th</sup> season:

Don’t tell me  
How to be  
‘Cause I like some suffering  
Don’t ask me  
What I need

I'm just fine  
Here finding me  
Me

As Buffy says to Xander, towards the end of the episode 'I Was Made for Loving

You':

**Buffy:** Look at me obsessing about being with someone. I don't need a guy right now. I need me. I need to get comfortable being alone with Buffy

In the seventh season episode 'Beneath You' Willow makes the realisation 'everything connected'. In *Buffy* the 'source' music is connected with the narrative process, even if the viewer is never aware of this role.

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