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© Jared Depasquale

David DeCoteau's *THE FRIGHTENING* featured an elegantly spooky score crafted along symphonic lines.

Soundtrax **Music to Sooth the Frightening Screams that Hate the Living - Part One**

Composer Jared Depasquale's world of direct-to-video horror film music

Dateline: Thursday, February 27, 2003

By: RANDALL D. LARSON

By: Columnist

With the spate of independent and direct-to-video horror and science fiction films that are proliferating on the shelves of your local Blockbuster, Hollywood, or Big Fred's Boffo Video stores, the boom in creatively low-budget genre filmmaking has never been better or seemingly more effusive. While the quality of these productions may vary as much as do their plots, character development, and aesthetic integrity, one element that can be evaluated as much on its own merits as it can as part of the collaborative essence that is cinema (even bad cinema) is the musical score. Even here, the value ranges from cheap, homegrown electronic plunking to symphonically designed synthesizer and symphonics.

Among the better musical accompaniment that had graced some of these horror videos are those of composer Jared Depasquale, whose inventive scores have enhanced low-budget, direct-to-video releases like **WITCHHOUSE**, **THE DEAD HATE THE LIVING**, **WITCHHOUSE 2**, **THE FRIGHTENING**, and **ANCIENT EVIL: SCREAM OF THE MUMMY**. This week we begin a two-part examination of Depasquale and the art of composing for contemporary low budget horror.

Jared Depasquale graduated with a bachelor of music in guitar

performance and an emphasis in composition from Duquesne University. He went to work briefly for Opryland's "Fiesta Texas" in San Antonio as a guitarist before seeking opportunities in film composition. Like many contemporary film composers, Depasquale was inspired by **STAR WARS**, which renovated and legitimized the power of symphonic music in motion pictures.



Composer Jared Depasquale
© Jared Depasquale

"I saw **STAR WARS** in the theater when I was seven years old, and I was completely in awe," Jared recalls. "I was still seven years away from even picking up a guitar and starting my musical journey, but there was something in that movie that moved me. The visuals were spectacular and the characters intriguing, but that wasn't it. There was this sound, and I didn't understand what it was at the time. This sound was with me when I was running around outside, riding my bike, or throwing a baseball. Shortly after seeing the movie, my parents bought me these records from the film. They contained the dialogue, the sound effects, and the *music* from the majority of the film. I would sit in my room and listen to them non-stop. It was through this experience that dialogue and music became one element, and I loved it; they worked together, and they enhanced each other."

Jared spent four years in apprenticeship in Detroit with Joseph LoDuca (**EVIL DEAD**, **YOUNG HERCULES**, **XENA**, **BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF**), learning the intricacies of composing music for films. "The four years that I spent with Joe were the most valuable experiences of my musical career. I came on board the LoDuca team in October of 1993 after he had recently completed the score to **ARMY OF**

1999 after he had recently completed the score to **ARREST OF DARKNESS**. Joe never sat down with me and said, 'This is how I score this or that,' but I watched and listened very intently. I also asked a lot of questions! I basically lived and breathed his music for four years. Joe gave me the skills and the confidence I needed to go on my own and I am very grateful to him."



WITCHHOUSE in 1999 was Jared Depasquale's first feature length score after four years apprenticing with Joe LoDuca.

© 1999 Full Moon

deadlines, budgets, and the requirements of screen music. "I was scared to death, excited beyond belief, and utterly overwhelmed that I had to write that much music in such a short period of time."

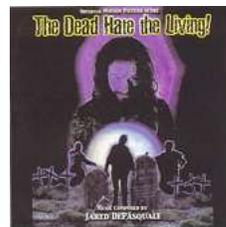
After **WITCHHOUSE**, Depasquale scored a number of independent direct-to-video horrors. Recognizing that horror film music has a long and full-blooded history, Jared took the approach of creating horror scores that worked within that tradition yet provided something fresh. "I find that music for horror films can be quite original and sometimes groundbreaking, and I try to approach each film as its own unique story," he says. "I think that there is an opportunity for a composer to be very imaginative within a horror film, which isn't always the case in other genres. There are so many ways to approach writing a horror score, and we can go wherever our mind takes us. I find that very freeing.

"I try to look for something in the film to inspire me - the style in which it is shot, a character, the scenery, the colors in the film, etc. Most of the time, colors inspire me because I have this weird connection between colors and musical keys. What makes scoring many low budget horror films so difficult is the lack of depth in the script and its characters. If you don't have a character or story that makes you feel *something* then you really have a very difficult job to do. And when a composer is put in these types of situations, then you have a lot of responsibility and a lot of work ahead of you."

Working in the realm of independent film and direct-to-video production has its own unique set of challenges. "The budget and deadline restrictions that I faced with those direct-to-video projects were awful!" Depasquale says. "Each of these horror films was written in three weeks. When I say three weeks, I mean that day one marked receiving the film, and day 21 marked when I turn in the masters. In three weeks you have composed, orchestrated, recorded, and mixed the 65-minute music score. It is utterly draining, and the financial payment makes it questionable if it is worth it. But the exciting thing is that there is music in existence that wasn't there before. You were given a challenge and you did it. You pushed yourself in a direction that you never have gone before."

Depasquale's scores have featured a mixture of electronics, voices, and acoustic instruments, although the composer's personal preference is to always score for an orchestra. "I find the orchestra to be timeless, emotional, and very elegant. However, in many 'modern pop culture films,' electronic elements are very effective and sometimes downright cool - **THE MATRIX** is a fantastic example. In some of the films that I have done, the director has requested that certain scenes have an electronic undertone to it. Since I am serving their needs, an electronic undertone is what they will get, and most of the time it is what is appropriate for the scene anyway.

Of course when a budget is low, you don't have many choices. In my earlier films, I spent about 80% of the budget on live musicians because I really wanted to do an impressive job early in my career. Live musicians will always deliver something that isn't there with the synthesizers. On **THE DEAD HATE THE LIVING!** and **ANCIENT EVIL**, I threw most of my money into a small choir, and small string and woodwind sections."



THE DEAD HATE THE LIVING! - Full Moon's low budget zombie pic featured an ominous, darkly-hewn

score full of brooding atmospheres.

© Jared Depasquale

The degree to which a director imposes himself into the musical aspects of these films has varied, some providing close input and scrutiny, others letting Depasquale go off and write the score independently. "On **WITCHHOUSE**, David DeCoteau told me he wanted a big score like Bernard Herrmann," Jared says. "I wrote the main title in 7/4 using a lot of orchestral percussion and piano fx, and he loved it. After that, he completely left me alone. On **THE DEAD HATE THE LIVING!**, Dave Parker had a crystal clear vision for that film, and knew what he wanted in every scene. We had many long conversations during the scoring of that film. As a side note, I would say that there is a 'healthy' balance between a director and composer. A composer needs to know the director's thoughts and visions, but there comes a point where you have analyzed a scene too much and you have lost your initial gut reaction and instinct."

One of the biggest challenges Depasquale finds in these types of films is how to bring a sense of cohesiveness to the picture. "I need to create or enhance a sense of flow, of tension, and of release," he says. "The next challenge is to make the audience care about the characters and the story they are watching through music. You find yourself asking, 'Am I feeling something when I watch this scene?'"

These scores are not commercially available but can be had via Depasquale's web site at www.mindspring.com/~depasquale.

Be sure to check back for the conclusion next week.

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