

For personal viewing and printing only

Copyright © 2006
Borderline Productions
All rights reserved



Q: How did "Way Down In The Hole" become "The Wire"'s main theme? What were the runner-ups? [Kaela, Pu]

A: We began working on *The Wire* as a pilot for HBO. The episode which became the first episode of Season 1 was originally produced as a single one-hour pilot. HBO had the option of green-lighting the first season after they saw the pilot. I was originally hired as the composer, music editor, and sound designer, and gradually overtook the position of music supervisor once the first season got rolling for real. It's very unusual for one person to hold all of those responsibilities on a single program, but it worked well for me, as these were entwined and compatible areas in which I had experience.

The only other serious contender for the opening of the show was "Step By Step" by Jesse Winchester, which as I'm sure you know, was used as the montage song in the final episode of Season 1. When I heard it the first time, I saw the appeal of the lyrics but felt that musically it was way too slow, un-hip, white, and folksy for the opener of a cop show set in black urban Baltimore. I think I wrote about ten different musical sketches for the opening of the show. Most of them were songs, and a few were instrumental pieces. David Simon basically hated all of it. One of them ended up becoming "The Fall," the piece which now plays over the end credits.

I also suggested some other songs: "Inner City Blues" by Marvin Gaye, "There's A Price to Pay to Live In Paradise" by The J.B.'s, and a few others. In retrospect, "Way Down In The Hole" seems perfect and inevitable, but of course it now has the weight of history and fifty episodes supporting it.

I have to say, when I started on *The Wire*, I had no idea what the show really was about and couldn't possibly have imagined how good it would become or how challenging and rewarding the work would end up being. I thought I was going to work for a few weeks on a pilot for a cop show. I had never seen another HBO series, including *The Sopranos*. I can see with long hindsight that I was pretty clueless at the beginning of the journey.

Q: How are the montage scenes built? Is the song chosen first, then film assembled, or the other way around? [Sandee, Pu]

A: With the exception of the first season (and maybe the second? I can't remember), the script describes the action and content of the montage but does not indicate the musical choice. The editor starts piecing together the sequence and we try a lot of different pieces of music against it. Season 3 for a while was set to "Voodoo Chile" by Jimi Hendrix, but David was never quite convinced, and the Hendrix estate was typically wary about licensing the music to anything which included drug references. As with most of the musical choices, everyone working on the show is free to make suggestions, and we do try a lot of different cues. But in the end David Simon always has the final pick. I was pleased that the Season 4 montage piece ended up being one that I suggested, but I think all three of the previous montages were David's finds.

Q: As a white guy who grew up in the UK, how do you choose music that's credible in a black urban culture? [Jim King]

A: Well, there are a lot of thorny issues of cultural authenticity to sort through whenever creating fiction that attempts to depict real people and places, not just music. I personally believe that someone with my exact qualifications who happened to be black and from Baltimore would probably be a better choice for the job than me. I guess I'm just glad that

the producers of *The Wire* didn't hire that person! But I don't believe that specific race, class or nationality requirements are necessary to do a good and credible job, with the possible exception of actors. Research and experience can go a really long way, as I think *The Wire* shows in many areas other than music as well. Also, while much of the music in *The Wire* is contemporary hip-hop, there's a pretty wide range of other stuff as well - lot's of classic R&B, lot's of crappy pop music from the 50's - 80's, jazz, Greek music, some classical, even Chinese music and Korean pop in Season 4. A music supervisor ideally needs to have a deep knowledge of many genres of music, in addition to experience with music licensing and an aesthetic sense of how to tell stories with music. While I'm stronger in some areas than others, I do in fact have a very broad musical taste and interest, and know a lot about most genres of music.

I live in Harlem and pay a lot of attention to what music is playing on the street, and what my friends and neighbors are listening to, which has been another good source for ideas. I've been known to confiscate the mp3 player of my 16-year-old neighbor Shantelle and examine her playlists. She first suggested Chris Brown to me for one of the classroom scenes in Season 4.

De'Rodd Hearn, the apprentice editor on *The Wire*, has lived in Baltimore his whole life and knows the city and the music scene like nobody's business. Some of his family members are the real people who were the basis for the characters in *The Corner*. De'Rodd has been an invaluable resource for years on the show. I often consult with him about what people in Baltimore are listening to. De'Rodd recommended Bossman to me last season, and I really wanted to use Bossman's track "Hand Clap", but his music is ensnared in sample clearance issues at his label.

Q: Tell us how you found the local Baltimore artists for season 4. You didn't hang out on a corner, did you? [anonymous]

A: During 2005, several people working on the show became aware of "The Hamsterdam Mixtape," a now-classic, hugely-popular compilation of local Baltimore hip-hop artists, produced by Darkroom Productions, and obviously named after the drug market "Hamsterdam" featured in Season 3. David Simon was given a copy and was really impressed by the music as well as being tickled by the homage. He passed "The Hamsterdam Mixtape" along to me, and I got in touch with Juan Donovan and Jamal Roberts, the two producers from Baltimore who comprise Darkroom. We began an interesting back-and-forth that went on for several months, and we ended up using about seven Darkroom tracks in the show - songs produced by them but performed by various other artists: Tyree Colion, Mullyman, Diablo, and The Plague, among others. I had a prior relationship with DJ Technics, whose music we had used in Season 3, and one of his tracks ended up in the show this season. I also spent time in Baltimore record shops, reading the Baltimore City Paper, and talking to people who live in Baltimore and know a lot more than me about the local music scene. Through these sorts of avenues I ended up contacting Rod Lee directly and using his great song "Dance My Pain Away." I also worked with Aaron Lacrate, a Baltimore Club producer most known for his "Bmore Gutter Music" CD, and we ended up using the fantastic track "That's Da Sound" by locals Dirty Hartz, which was produced by Aaron.

Ironically, in the end, we only used one actual track from "The Hamsterdam Mixtape," the song "Jail Flick" by Diablo, because it is one of the only songs that doesn't contain samples. All of the other tracks were newly produced by Darkroom and will be included on "Hamsterdam Vol. 2" which is scheduled to hit the street before the end of November.

Q: Who do you call to get clearance to use a song? How long does it take? What's the average cost? Were there any songs you wanted but couldn't get? [Jim King]

A: Shain Miller at a Los Angeles company called EMG has handled the music clearances on *The Wire* since the very beginning. Shain is the one who actually negotiates with the labels and publishers to get the contracts and licenses completed. A lot of music clearance work for film and TV is a pretty straight-forward corporate process - you contact the film licensing person at

Universal, they fax you back a quote based on industry standards, and these huge corporate entities end up signing paperwork and transferring money back and forth between their bank accounts. But on *The Wire* it often gets more complicated. Hip-hop is notoriously difficult to license because most hip-hop tracks have several writers and producers and often side artists, and all of these people potentially need to sign off on a deal. I would say that over 50% of the major label hip-hop we try to license ends up not being used in the show. Usually it's because no one knows who owns the rights to a portion of the track or a sample, or because the multiple writers can't agree on the percentages they own, or because one of the many people involved fails to respond.

Whenever we go outside of the usual corporate arena, clearances become more unusual and challenging. For unsigned acts like the local Baltimore artists and others, Shain and I have often talked to someone's mom at home when trying to reach them, and during Season 4, on more than one occasion we had to send papers to someone who was in jail. Sometimes they might not believe that we actually work for HBO or think they are in trouble.

It can take anywhere from two days to never to clear a track. One of the longest and most complicated clearances we ever did was for "Lean Wit It, Rock Wit It" by Dem Franchize Boyz, which was used in Season 4. It took about six months, during which time, dozens of phone calls, faxes, and emails made the rounds.

I think it's in bad taste to get into specific budget figures for *The Wire*, but I can tell you ballpark numbers for a cable TV show in general. For all the various rights including home video and now internet, a show will pay about \$1,000 for a piece of library music or a track from an unknown artist, somewhere around \$10,000 - \$20,000 for a track from an established indie label, and up to \$50,000 or even more for a major hit from a major label. There's always a huge range of variations depending on the usage and prior relationships - a five second clip playing in the background from a car that drives by is cheaper than a two-minute usage over the main titles of a show, and when you license multiple tracks from a single source they might make deals. The music budget for a single episode of a show that uses a lot of source music might be \$150,000 - \$200,000.

Songs we wanted and couldn't get?

"Gotta Give The Peeps What They Need" by Public Enemy
(Chuck D didn't want his music used in a show that features drug use and drug dealing)
"Be Without You" by Mary J. Blige (The label needed her approval and she never responded)
"Business" by Eminem (He won't license his music for TV shows)
"Magic Stick" by Lil' Kim (someone didn't respond/sample couldn't be found, etc.)
"Jesus Walks" by Kanye West (don't remember why)
"Clype of Doom" by Ghostface Killah (no response)
"Hard Knock Life" by Jay-Z (don't remember why)
"Gasolina" by Daddy Yankee (didn't respond)
"Jiggle It" by Young Leek (couldn't determine who owned the rights)
"96 Tears" by ? And the Mysterians (too expensive)

...and about a hundred more.

Q: Any news or progress on a soundtrack? Do you have soundtrack rights for all the versions of the theme and the montage songs? [Nigel Ray Williamson]

A: No specific news that I can share, but I am confident that there will be a soundtrack release for *The Wire* along with Season 5. We do not own the rights for the theme and montage songs. When we license a song for use in the show, it does not include the right to use the song on a soundtrack. That's a separate deal that has to be made for the soundtrack specifically.

Q: Is there a particular song or songs you promoted that you felt were memorable in the show? [John from Santa Barbara]

A: One of my favorites that I found for the show is "Efuge, Efuge" by Stelios Kazantzidis, which plays in Season 2 as Frank walks to his doom. I found the song on a compilation CD in a Greek record store in Astoria, where I spent a weekend hunting through record bins with my friend Persephone Karakosta. Kazantzidis is considered "the voice of the Greek Diaspora" and wrote many beautiful ballads about the immigrant experience and exile. George Pelecanos also suggested some great songs for that sequence, but we ended up using "Efuge, Efuge," which was also quite challenging to secure the rights for.

Q: Are you pushing any songs for inclusion in season 5? [Kaela]

A: No, absolutely not! First of all, I merely "suggest," I don't push! Second, the episodes aren't even written yet. We pick 90% of the music after the episode is shot, as it's being edited, and final choices are still being made up to the very last minute. Occasionally a song will be written into the script ("Shaft" in the opening of Season 3 is an example), but that rarely happens. Also, we want a lot of the music to be very current, so I would guess a significant portion of the music that will appear in Season 5 hasn't been released yet.

Q: Tell us how "The Fall" came about. Structure, theme, instrumentation, etc. Was it written for the show? Did you perform all the parts? [Susan]

A: The actual process of writing a piece of music is not only fairly impenetrable, but also not that interesting. The piece was written for the show. I played all the parts except for the violin, which was played by my long-time collaborator Andre Burke. I wanted the piece to feel like film soundtrack music with an underlying hip-hop influence, which I guess it sort of is.

It's so different than anything else in the show, and I think that the piece has gotten better as it has aged, but through no fault of my own. After 50 episodes it becomes iconic and ritualized, and hearing those hi-hats kick in is very satisfying by this point. But the first time we all looked at it against the end of episode 1 as D'Angelo walks away under the trees, it didn't have that weight. I was surprised at the time that David Simon and Bob Colesberry gave it the nod with few changes. I think Bob thought the electric piano was too loud, and David wanted the strings to play less of the time, sort of thinning it out. That was pretty much it, and it has been there since.



I do remember that I initially tried a longer, sparse string intro that began as D'Angelo was in the crowd, about thirty seconds of music which built until the groove kicked in under the fade-out, but David and Bob were adamant that there should be "no score" in the show, even though putting music under a dramatic moment certainly heightens things. At the time I didn't really get that, but now I get it.

Q: Tell us how the various season montage songs were chosen? [Jason Tippitt, Jim King]

A: As mentioned earlier, "Step By Step" by Jesse Winchester was a theme song of sorts for the first season in David's mind, so it made sense as the final montage song. "I Feel Alright" by Steve Earle was the only serious contender for Season 2 - Steve Earle has a recurring role as Bubbles' NA sponsor, and we had wanted to use some of his music. The song as used has a real ironic dissonance over the scenes of failure and devastation, which is something David likes to do with music. He has said that in real life you never get songs playing which reflect the moment, but rather songs which play against the mood. If you walk in to a bar and meet your soul mate, the song playing on the jukebox won't be a swelling love song, but more like "96 Tears."

Season 3's "Fast Train" by Solomon Burke was chosen by David (not sure if someone else suggested it) and has echoes of *The Wire's* symbolic train theme, as well as the season's

concern with issues of reform (slow train coming...). We tried quite a few other songs on Season 3, but "Fast Train" was the best.

Season 4 was wide open, and I made David a CD with about ten songs that I thought might work, among them the ballad "Tupelo" by James Bracken, which is most known as performed by John Lee Hooker, but this was a version performed by Steve Cropper, Pops Staples & Albert King (which I discovered on the excellent music blog "The Captain's Crate"). I thought "Tupelo" was a great mood, but was a bit too specifically about something else. I also liked "Slipping Into Darkness" by War, but it was a bit too "on point" (being "on point" is one of the cardinal sins with music on *The Wire*). We were trying to use New Orleans music where possible in Season 4 because Katrina was on our minds and we liked the idea of sending a few dollars to New Orleans artists in the months after the devastation down there.

I came across Dr. John's song "I Walk On Gilded Splinters," which had great lyrics - relevant but not too "on point," with overtones of saints and sinners - but the original version didn't have the energy that I thought we needed. So when I found Paul Weller's version, it seemed perfect. I was a fan of Weller's band "The Jam" as a teenage punk growing up in England, and saw them play live several times in the late 70's. I never really followed Weller's solo career, but when I heard his version of "I Walk On Gilded Splinters," I loved it. So maybe being a white kid from the UK did inform my sensibility in a way which ended up helping the show after all.

**Q: "I Walk On Gilded Splinters" sounds a lot like "Step By Step." Did you notice?
[Jim King]**

A: Uh...no. They don't seem similar to me at all, although listening now, I realize they are in the same key and do have a similar tempo. Jim, nothing gets by you on *The Wire*, does it?

Q: Thanks, Blake, and good luck with Season 5. [Jim King, waiting for those hi-hats to kick in]

For personal viewing and printing only

Copyright © 2006
Borderline Productions
All rights reserved