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Mark Mancina brings acoustic guitar to the movies



GRAMMY-WINNING FILM COMPOSER and record producer Mark Mancina has lived in two musical worlds for as long as he can remember. He grew up in southern California and studied classical guitar and composition while at the same time playing and writing rock and pop music on acoustic and electric guitars. Mancina has found his niche in the film industry, where his love of both kinds of music comes into play and he is able to incorporate guitar into many of his critically acclaimed projects, including the soundtracks to *Tarzan*, *The Lion King*, *Speed*, and *Twister*, and albums by Yes, Kenny Loggins, and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer.

Mancina got his first break in the record-producing business when he hooked up with Yes guitarist Trevor Rabin in 1989 to help write and produce Yes' gold album *Union*. In 1990 producer Trevor Horn, alumnus of the innovative British band Art of Noise, pulled Mancina in to work on tracks for Sinéad O'Connor and Seal. Mancina worked on the instrumental arrangements and coarranged Seal's hit song "Crazy."

Horn and Mancina had just begun collaborating on feature film scores when Mancina first used a small-bodied Martin guitar for recording. "We were doing a song called 'Last Note of Freedom' with Billy Idol for the soundtrack of *Days of Thunder*," he recalls. "I was going to put some acoustic guitar on the track, and Trevor pulled out an old Martin orchestra model and said, 'Play this.' It sounded incredible on tape. Ever since then I have been a total acoustic guitar freak, always in search of different types of acoustic steel-stringed guitars, with different-sized bodies and woods, to use for recording."

Mancina's career as a composer continued to thrive as his album production credits grew. He wrote the original score for the TV series *Millennium*, scored a number of feature films, and then spent a year in England producing Emerson, Lake, and Palmer's *Black Moon* for Polygram Records. He returned to scoring with such films as *Return to Paradise*, *Moll Flanders*, *Twister*, *Con-Air*, and *Speed* (which fea-

tured Alan Holdsworth playing electric guitar). When *Speed* took off, Mancina was asked to produce and arrange tracks for Disney's animated classic *The Lion King*. The soundtrack earned Mancina a Grammy in 1994; more than 11 million copies were sold worldwide.

Mancina's next Disney project (co-written, arranged, and produced with Phil Collins) was the soundtrack for *Tarzan*, which presented some particular guitar needs. Mancina found a kindred spirit in California guitar builder Lance McCollum (McCollum Guitars, PO Box 806, Colfax, CA 95713; [530] 346-7657). "Lance was willing to experiment along with me," Mancina explains. "He was really into building custom, specific-sized instruments out of different types of woods. For *Tarzan*, I wanted Lance to build me a parlor-sized guitar and also a 12-string."

One of the initial songs that Mancina and Collins collaborated on was "Two Worlds," which opens the movie. "The very first thing I did," Mancina recalls, "was take a Martin 5-18 and Lance McCollum's parlor guitar and play rhythm accompaniment to Phil's vocals. You can still hear the guitars nicely in the mix. Because they're small-bodied, they're very focused."

The McCollum 12-string also added a light, transparent sound on two tracks, "You'll Be in My Heart" and "Always in All Ways," which Mancina was coproducing for Kenny Loggins' next album, *Return to Pooh Corner*. "I wanted a 12-string that sounded like a harpsichord and didn't get too big when I strummed it," he says. "Lance built me a koa guitar with a shallow body depth, so the sound doesn't have a lot of room to bounce around."

Another luthier Mancina sought out was Englishman Andy Manson, who built guitars for one of Mancina's musical idols, Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull. "I've always been chasing a lot of what Ian Anderson did in Jethro Tull," says Mancina, "sonically and even stylistically. You can listen to some of my scores, such as *Moll Flanders*, and hear Jethro Tull all over the place. I had Manson make me a Nightingale model, a small guitar initially designed for Anderson, which records really well and works great for blues too. It sounds almost like an Autoharp." (Manson guitars are distributed in the U.S. by Shoreline Acoustic Music, www.samusic.com.)

The joy of working with acoustic guitars, says Mancina, is that they can be

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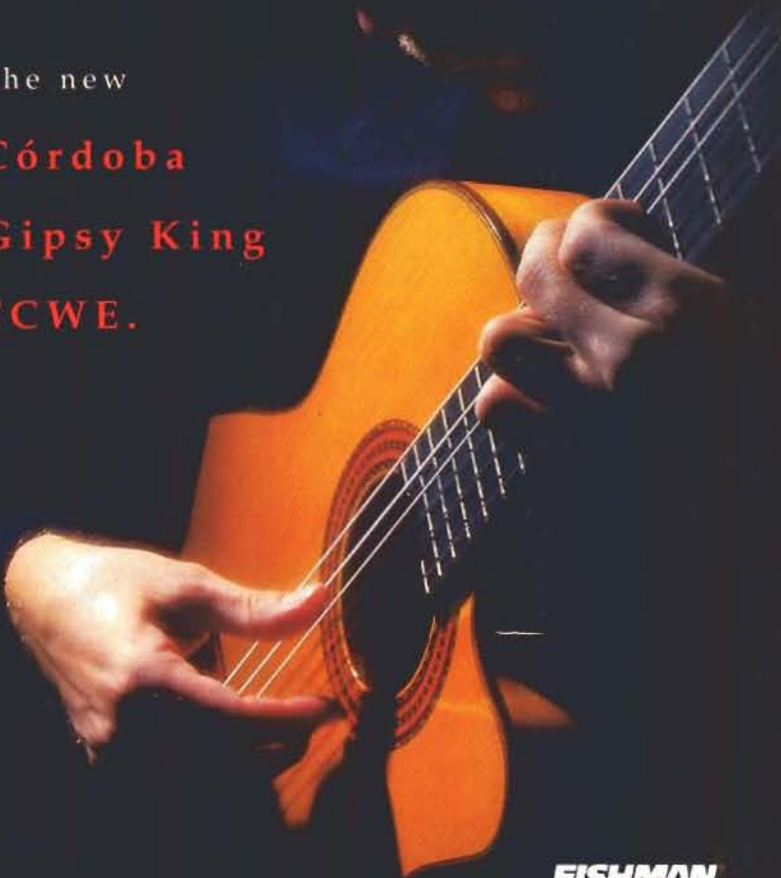
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used in so many different ways. "I've used acoustic guitar in a very 'normal' manner, like in a solo during an emotional scene. On *Tarzan* I used the guitar in place of a harp, capoed up very high and played fingerstyle. There is a piece on the soundtrack called 'One Family' that features McCollum's parlor guitar with no processing or effects. When I play it for people, they don't even think it's a guitar!"

Mancina generally records his acoustic guitars with a Dirk Brauner large-diaphragm tube mic, handmade in Germany, with a Manley compressor and either a Focusrite or a Millennia

mic preamp. He sometimes uses a Geffel condenser mic or an AKG C-12 tube mic instead. "Sometimes we use two mics, about three feet back from the guitar," says Mancina. "That sounds pretty natural." He records to an Apogee AD-8000 24-bit Pro Tools system and an Otari Radar II Digital 24-track machine.

Mancina differs from many contemporary film composers in that he himself plays many of the instruments on his scores. He is game to take on almost any new instrument and has a seemingly endless collection of exotic stringed and percussion instruments

for recording. But he also relishes the opportunity to use the talents of professional guitar players. "I don't practice guitar for ten hours a day, like my friend Doug Smith does," he says. "I wrote the acoustic guitar part for *Moll Flanders*, but I couldn't play it well enough, so I called Doug and he flew down. Richard Johnson and ex-Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett are two other players I'm going to grab for a score at some point. They both have such interesting approaches."

His writing process depends on the project, but Mancina often watches the film and then goes away from it to start creating the score. "It's very hard to find what music fits a film," he says. "Sometimes the first thing you come up with works, and a lot of the time nothing works for days and days."

Oftentimes Mancina has everything to do with a film's score and little to do with the existing songs selected for the movie and soundtrack. "I had nothing to do with the songs in *Twister*, and I thought a few of them were embarrassing," he recalls. When *The Lion King* was adapted for Broadway, Mancina took on the songs, scoring, and production. "I had to arrange some of Elton John's new material, write a new score, write songs, work with African vocals, write lyrics. . . . It was taxing to say the least, but it was also extremely gratifying. It was one of the best things I've ever been involved in," he says.

Mancina frequently begins writing his scores on guitar at home, rather than on the piano in his studio. "Piano is a little too unfriendly," he says. "It's like having an orchestra sitting in front of you. A guitar is a little bit more personal." He typically uses standard tuning or D A D G A D.

Mancina's work is diverse, ranging from the orchestra-plus-synthesizer score of *Speed* to the organic instrumental soundtrack of *Tarzan*. His goals are to focus on the melody (rather than creating sonic "wallpaper") and to use real instruments rather than electronic samples as much as possible. If he ever loses sight of these goals, all he has to do is catch an acoustic guitar performance, and he's right back on track. "When I go to a show and see an incredible musician sit down and play acoustic guitar," he says, "it just blows my mind. That's the real thing. That's why I got into music."

—Julie Bergman

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