

The Perfect Pachydermous Percussion Pitch: A *Looney Tunes* Rhythm

By Jeffrey Taylor

We're all a bit looney. Surely the memory bank of sights and sounds from your childhood includes an episode of *Looney Tunes*, a cartoon series produced by Warner Brothers Studios during the Golden Age of American animation (1930 to circa 1960).¹ Since the debut of *Looney Tunes* in 1930, the enduring characters of the show have connected with every generation, launching the franchise into the role of a commercial icon. Among the many contributing factors to *Looney Tunes*' eternal success is the superior use of sound and music to complement action, providing an emotional barometer while establishing setting and serving as a veritable timekeeper.²

Accompanying the on-screen activity in the cartoons with music requires a gifted team of artists. The directors, composers, sound editors, and musicians responsible for the work at Warner Brothers were some of the best in the world at their craft. Behind the scenes, the sounds of percussion served as an emphatic driving force, providing an infrastructure of sound to the storylines of the show.

With an extensive library of recorded material, an on-deck classical symphony orchestra, and a small team of animators in place, Warner Brothers hired visionary composer Carl Stalling in 1936 to lead

the musical direction of *Looney Tunes* and its sister series, *Merrie Melodies*. Within months, Stalling was in full command of his process, utilizing original compositions and the music available through Warner's several publishing companies to complete the scores.

Although Stalling found preference writing for bassoon, trombone, and stringed instruments,³ he consistently crafted space for percussion. As a small example of the 39 musical cues from the 1938 cartoon *The Isle of Pingo-Pongo*, three were predetermined for ad lib drumming.⁴ Over the next 20 years, Stalling produced a six-minute score each week, accentuating his musical ideas with percussion while creating a blueprint for the future of music in animation.

Widely considered as one of the few great comic sound editors, multi-instrumentalist Tregoweth Edmond "Treg" Brown was an integral part of the *Looney Tunes* franchise. His creative work with sound effects are an extension of Foley art, a trade where artists recreate realistic, ambient, and everyday sound effects to enhance the auditory experience of movies.⁵ Often, percussionists play instruments that are not distinctively percussion, and although not trained as a percussionist, Brown repeatedly accepted this role. When tasked with mimick-

ing roadrunner chirps after the character famously outduels the coyote, Brown recorded the sound of his thumb tapping the top of a Coca-Cola bottle. Called upon to emulate the sound of a kangaroo bouncing, he placed a nail file on the end of a table and struck it repeatedly.⁶ Time and again Brown ingeniously integrated percussive effects into Stalling's orchestrations, balancing a vast spectrum of instrumentation while providing the cartoons with a "great deal of subconscious humor."⁷

In addition to his "wizardry in creating innumerable sound effects from everyday objects,"⁸ Brown also maintained an infamous cabinet of instruments. Several of the items were "traps," a collection of percussion sound effects created in the early twentieth century. Traps were manufactured to provide accompaniment to motion pictures during the silent-film era, accomplished by an assemblage of the "contraptions" into one station.⁹

When sound-synchronized films or "talkies" arrived in 1927, the percussion industry experienced a devastating blow in employment opportunity. By the close of World War II, drum companies had ceased production of these implements, rendering "traps" sound effects obsolete.¹⁰ *Looney Tunes* is perhaps the final platform for consistent profession-

al utilization of the instruments, as the soundtrack to generations of kids' lives is full of the vintage effects – shot cushions, slide whistles, horse hooves, and train imitations – all seamlessly integrated into Stalling's orchestral scores by Brown.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the greater Los Angeles area encompassed the highest concentration of prodigious composers, writers, and performers of any place on the planet. Working within this mecca of musical greatness was the Warner Brothers Studio Orchestra, a group of musicians that were among the best in the business. Professionalism was a key requirement for the cartoon sessions, as each section of the score was often recorded in a single take. According to Greg Ford, director, historian, and consultant with Warner Brothers Animation, the music "was very difficult to play at times because there are so many key changes, sometimes timing changes right in the middle of the cue. So it was very complex and hard to do. But it was a great orchestra. I mean, the Warner's orchestra was, like, beyond belief."¹¹

BASEBALL BUGS

From the immeasurable collection of players involved in the production of *Looney Tunes*, one of the biggest stars to emerge from the Warner Brothers animation studio was Bugs Bunny. The wise-cracking, quick-witted, outspoken rabbit is one of the most popular cartoon characters of all time. In the 1940s, director Friz Freleng served a central role in the development of Bugs' personality. Throughout the decade, he tested and refined a formula of conflict where Bugs would face adversaries worthy of his keen intelligence. The proven recipe is on display in *Baseball Bugs* (1946), where the loveable rabbit faces a "whole team of interchangeable Gas-House Gorillas: hulking, blue-jawed, cigar-chewing monsters who pound umpires into the dirt when they don't like a call."¹² By the time of the episode's release, Carl Stalling and Treg Brown had spent a decade working together, mastering the art of cartoon musical accompaniment. The score for *Baseball Bugs* is a master-

class-worthy example of their work, enhanced through an extensive array of percussion.

A baseball game in New York City pitting the Gas-House Gorillas against the inferior Tea Totalers begins with a deep drive to left field, accented by a slapstick landing to a single note from a self-loading popgun. Gas-House Gorillas are dominating the action with a bell signaling each change on the lopsided scoreboard. The Gorillas pitcher is intimidating everyone, including the umpire he pegs into the ground to the sounds of a popgun and a slide whistle. As the Gorillas go back on offense, a ball-to-bat-like wooden strike provides a steady pulse for the Gorillas to conga line around the bases, tom-toms providing the accompaniment.

In need of an improbable comeback, a light timpani roll beckons Bugs Bunny's entry to the game. Playing every position, a shot cushion accents the catching of his own pitch, which sends him crashing into the backstop; two notes from the xylophone imply his blunder. The xylophone returns when Bugs takes to offense; a tricky ascending run matches each stride he takes while rounding the bases. With a comeback on track, Bugs' next hit pinballs off multiple Gas-House Gorillas, bouncing to the sounds of bells and glass bottles. The scoreboard lights up with new numbers to an ad-libbing xylophonist, and the word "tilted" appears to the sound of a ringing bell.

With the Tea-Totalers' resurgence nearly complete, Bugs takes the mound, needing one out to finish the game. Before delivering a final heave, he confirms the intricate balance of percussive sound effects as another timpani roll leads his attempt to paste a "pathetic palooka with a powerful paralyzing perfect pachydermous percussion pitch."¹³ To his surprise, the ball is belted out of the stadium, forcing Bugs to hail a taxi and the city bus to track it down. Taking an elevator to the roof of the Umpire State Building, he climbs a flagpole and throws his glove into the air, miraculously catching the ball to the sound of another shot cushion

strike. In the closing moments Bugs bursts through the head of a bass drum with his powers of invention still unmatched, signaling the end of an episode lush with percussion prowess. Refer to Table 1 for a detailed list of percussive sound effects found in *Baseball Bugs*.

The music and sounds of *Looney Tunes* are engrained in our minds and hearts. In fact, "countless Americans attribute their first conscious memory of the classical repertoire to cartoons."¹⁴ The show successfully introduced large segments of society to masterpieces of composition, while at the same time showcasing a balance of percussive sounds unlike anything heard before.

The time-honored show from the Golden Age of American animation provided a glorious window for percussion, where conventional sounds from our field were matched with the non-traditional. An active reliance on this blend enhanced some of the funniest gags in cartoon history and cemented the *Looney Tunes* soundtrack as an icon of our field.

ENDNOTES

1. *Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.
2. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, eds., *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 264.
3. Mervyn Cooke, ed., *The Hollywood Film Music Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.
4. Goldmark, *Tunes for Toons*, 35.
5. The trade originated around the early 1920s and is named after Jack Foley, who developed many sound effect techniques used in filmmaking.
6. *Behind the Tunes: Crash! Bang! Boom! - The Wild Sounds of Treg Brown*, directed by Constantine Nasr (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2004), 0:05:06 to 0:05:38, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xkikx1>.
7. Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 266.
8. I.S. Mowis, "Treg Brown: Biography," IMDB, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www>.

imdb.com/name/nm0114830/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.

9. These early kits contained a variety of “contraptions” such as whistles, cowbells, and more. “Contraptions” was shortened to “trap,” eventually becoming “trap” kit, a modern-day synonymous term for drum kit.
10. Nick White, “Vintage Percussion Sound Effects,” last modified October 4, 2019, <http://www.vintagepercussionsoundeffects.com/historical-background.html>.
11. Greg Ford, “Warner Brothers Music,” in-

terview by Linda Wertheimer, NPR Music, November 27, 2000, <https://www.npr.org/2000/11/27/1114630/npr-100-warner-brothers-music>.

12. Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 471.
13. *Baseball Bugs*, directed by Isadore Freleng (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 1946), 0:06:15 to 0:06:23, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6tj0co>.
14. Goldmark, *Tunes for Toons*, 107.

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Table 1: Percussion/percussive sound effect cues in *Baseball Bugs*

Percussion/percussive sound effect cues in <i>Baseball Bugs</i>		
Action	Instrument(s)	Time (min. sec.)
Opening theme (The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down)	snare drum, bass drum, crash cymbals, xylophone	0.00 – 0.17
Baseball being hit by a player for the Gas-House Gorillas	slapstick and popgun as ball lands	0.35
Scoreboard (score changes)	bell rings (traps)	0.40
Gas-House Gorillas’ pitcher preparing windup and delivery	cymbals accenting downbeats	1.00 – 1.13
Pitcher punches umpire into ground	popgun to slide whistle	1.16
Gas-House Gorillas getting hit after hit, conga line around bases	wooden strike (bat like), sustains steady pulse in accompanying music with tom-toms in background	1.31 – 1.58
Bugs Bunny’s entry to the game is announced (playing every position)	light timpani roll	2.36
Bugs catches his own pitch, sending him into the backstop	shot cushion and xylophone (two playful notes)	3.09
Perplexing slow ball thrown by Bugs, multiple Gas-House Gorillas’ swing and strikeout	tube swiped through air and deflating balloon	3.46 – 3.52
Bugs runs the bases after hit (sound occurs each time)	xylophone in time with Bugs’ steps	4.08 – 4.12
Gas-House outfielder makes catch, hit so hard it sends him flying into the dirt (his own grave)	shot cushion, cymbals, rubber pull (balloon-like)	5.02
Bugs hits a ball that bounces off multiple Gas-House Gorillas	Series of bells and glass bottles	5.18
Scoreboard lights up with new numbers	xylophone ad lib and ringing bell	5.20
Gas-House player runs the bases after hit	xylophone ascends and descends	5.35
Gas-House Gorilla takes a punch from Bugs and wobbles	tuned bells	5.38
Last at bat for the Gas-House Gorillas	timpani roll	6.11
Bugs makes catch to get final out	shot cushion and timpani roll	7.15
Bugs bursts through head of a bass drum	fabric tear	7.29