

Alyssa Milano is the central figure on the cover, wearing a light-colored, textured, halter-neck crop top. She has dark hair and is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a soft smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

TV GUIDE

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Who's behind the music?

The unsung maestros of TV—the folks who choose the background music—lend class, mystery, even sex appeal to your favorite characters

BY JENNIFER GRAHAM

WHEN MOBSTER TONY SOPRANO'S lip curls toward heaven, his expression might be conveying contempt. Or contrition. Or, given his capacity for eating, indigestion. But layer on the lilting strains of Cecilia Bartoli singing Vivaldi and the same gesture evokes a centuries-old, cultural *passione*.

"Music is magical," says Martin Bruestle, one of the many producers responsible for song selection on *The Sopranos*. "Play a piece of opera against Tony walking down the street and then play an old blues song, and they're going to be totally different scenes."

Once upon a time, the action on TV dramas and sitcoms was served up with music that evoked the show's original theme song—*Cheers*'s trademark ivory tickling; *Hill Street Blues*'s light-jazz piano riffs. Fast-forward to Fox's revved-up undercover cop series *Fastlane*, where the cast hurtles into action over such lyrics as "Ballin' Brooklyn dawn/Addicted to crys hooked on Don/15 G's hookers on..." by flashy New York rapper Fabolous. The music not only channels the mood, it sets the scene and sums up the characters.

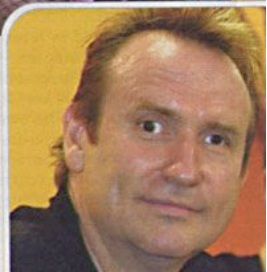
It's not for nothing that critics have compared *Fastlane*'s MTV-savvy formula of cops, cars and copious women to that of *Miami Vice*. Besides introducing TV audiences to rain-soaked neon hues and bunched-up Armani jacket sleeves, that seminal 1984 series was the first to allocate a sizable budget for music, launching a trend that shows no sign of slowing down nearly



Hay now: Singer Hay (inset) sets the tone for *Scrubs*'s Braff and Sarah Chalke.

20 years later. Previously, producers managed costs by using music composed specifically for a show or cover versions of popular songs. But *Vice* executive producer Michael Mann, inspired by MTV, spent a reported (and unprecedented) \$100,000 per episode to use actual pop and rock tunes (in addition to composer Jan Hammer's digitally synthesized score).

Soon, the built-in budget for popular music became the norm. *Murphy Brown* boogied along to



TOP: CHRIS NASTRONIC; BOTTOM: ARMANI AG; MIDDLE: GUY LAWRENCE/GETTY IMAGES

Motown gems. *Moonlighting* shimmied to jazz and soul ballads. *The Wonder Years* got down to '60s- and '70s-era classic rock. And record companies quickly learned they were sitting on a gold (record) mine—with even oldies commanding thousands of dollars per song. Costs have steadily risen since the days of *Miami Vice*—a single hit song can now be worth as much as \$15,000—and the growing demand often scores a double bonus for record labels: increased revenue and invaluable TV exposure for their artists. A little clever cross-promotion, however, can sweeten



Sheet music: Shakira (right) tells the *Real* story.



make sure that, first, it assists the story and, second, it can elevate the scene to something better." Case in point: On *The Sopranos*'s fourth-season premiere, Tony fetches his morning paper to the rollicking chords of 1984's "World Destruction" by John Lydon and Afrika Bambaataa. The intense lyrics—"The human race is becoming a disgrace/Countries are fighting with chemical warfare/Not giving a damn about the people who live"—are a testament not only to Tony's agitated state of mind but to the anxious, angry post-September 11 sentiments of a nation.

"There are some TV shows that are just like, 'Hey, which bands are in the Top 10? Let's put them in,'" says Amy Sherman-Palladino, executive producer of WB's sassy mother-daughter drama *Gilmore Girls*. "And that is something I really fight against." She goes about selecting her show's songs with a missionary's zeal and adds even more music to the mix by making the characters fans of such alt-rock royalty as Björk and Yo La Tengo. Scenes with Lorelai and precocious daughter Rory are often propelled by the witty California singer-songwriter Sam (Continued on page 47)



Girls power: *Gilmore Girls*'s Alexis Bledel and Lauren Graham (above) bop to Björk.



the deal for everyone: At the end of each *Dawson's Creek* episode, music heard on the show is highlighted in return for reduced or waived licensing fees.

But on a show like *The Sopranos*, creativity—not radio hits—is key. To set the scene, Bruestle taps into his own mental playlist. "Over your life, you are exposed to music and songs that are special and that leave an impression in your memory," he says. "It's a matter of combing through it and trying to figure out what works. We

WHO'S BEHIND THE MUSIC?

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Phillips. "There's something about [Phillips's] voice that says, 'I'm sweet and cute and pretty—but I can kill you if I need to,'" Sherman-Palladino says. "Which is sort of Lorelai to me."

So then what does the use of James Brown, Teddy Pendergrass and Bill Withers say about Bernie Mac? You guessed it. "Bernie is a big funk guy," says music supervisor Lynnette Jenkins, who, along with partner Larry Robinson, selects the Fox comedy's songs. "The typical spirit of *The Bernie Mac Show* is '70s and '80s R&B."

Mac may loom large over all aspects of his show—dialogue, direction, tone—but one thing he doesn't do is choose his own music. The cast members of NBC's *Scrubs*, however, are all over the tunes that color their scenes. "On the writing staff, there's a whole bunch of music freaks," says executive producer Bill Lawrence. "And now some of the actors and crew bring in CDs they like." That would explain the eclectic mix the show has become known for—alt-pop from the Shins, indie rock from the Butthole Surfers, acoustic stylings from Lazlo Bane. "On our Web site, the most hits we get is people asking who a song's artist was and how to get their hands on it," Lawrence says. Which brings us to another new TV reality: More than a dozen shows released soundtrack CDs in 2002, among them *Scrubs*, *Providence*, *Gilmore Girls* and *Six Feet Under*.

Featured prominently on the *Scrubs* soundtrack is Colin Hay, formerly of the Australian '80s band Men at Work. After Zach Braff, who plays J.D., brought in Hay's latest CD, the singer struck up a relationship with Lawrence and is now

practically a series regular: His song "Beautiful World" was featured in the first season's finale; he had a guest spot on the show this fall; and on a special musical episode airing January 23, the cast will sing his song "Waiting for My Real Life to Begin."

Resident doctors who suddenly break into song? Blame it on MTV. And just as *Miami Vice* turned to the then-burgeoning music network for inspiration, so MTV took a cue from the networks by developing original programming—set to a soundtrack, of course. For MTV staples like *The Real World*, *Road Rules* and *Dismissed*, there's a built-in advantage. "We have the good



They feel good: Brown (left) sets the mood for Keilita Smith, Mac.



fortune to be able to use a lot of music that's right off of *Total Request Live*," says *Real World* coexecutive producer Jon Murray. And it's surprising how well hit singles can tell the story. When Southern siren Trishelle hit the sheets with strapping bartender Steven during the premiere episode of *The Real World: Las Vegas*, Shakira's "Underneath Your Clothes" narrated their sex scene. "Underneath your clothes," goes the chorus, are "all the things I deserve for being such a good girl." No voice-over required. ■