

SWAN SONG

THE MUSIC OF THUNDERCATS

David Crichton

‘Thunder, Thunder, Thundercats HO!’ The battle cry of excited youngsters throughout the mid-1980s. Not only the catch-phrase of this new animated TV show’s hero but also the beginning of one of the most famous theme tunes in children’s programming history.

Thundercats was an animated television program created by Rankin/Bass productions and it soon became a massive hit worldwide. During the course of 130 episodes it combined the talents of countless individuals all experts in the fields of writing, animation, voicing or scoring and the end product was a masterpiece of its kind. This TV show told of a group of feline nobles who fled their planet due to its imminent destruction. Finding a new home in a distant galaxy, they set out to survive, using only teamwork and the mystical power of ‘The Sword of Omens.’

The show appealed to children and parents alike with its fresh approach to action programming and moral storylines. Everything about *Thundercats* was skillfully produced, and perhaps one of its most enduring and successful elements was its unique music score. Unlike other contemporary television series, *Thundercats* did not feature the sometimes emotionless and bland purely electronic music that could be found elsewhere. Instead composer and musician Bernard Hoffer referred back to classical scoring techniques to create a timeless body of work.

Bernard Hoffer was born in Zurich, Switzerland on October 14th 1934. His father was a pharmaceutical research chemist involved in post doctoral work at the ‘Technicalische Hochschule’ in Zurich. Two weeks after his birth Bernard moved to Basel where his father began work in the research department of ‘Hoffmann- LaRoche’ a company he continued working for throughout his life.

Bernard’s father held over 40 patents of important drugs: including Gantrisin, the discovery of a B vitamin, and the process of making vitamins soluble for IV feeding. In 1941 the company moved its research department and six scientists, including Bernard’s family were transferred from Basel to Nutley, New Jersey USA.

Bernard's affinity with music began at an early age and he recalls how his mother, who was a pianist, must have taught him to write because he had started writing by the age of 6. He writes "I actually don't know how I learned musical notation but it seems I always knew it".

While in grade school, Bernard began to have formal piano lessons and was sent weekly to Dalcroze School in NYC where he took classes in Solfeggio, Eurythmics, and Improvisation at the piano. While in high school Bernard studied composition, his teacher was Max Wald, a student of Vincent D'Indy, and his counterpoint teacher was Kurt Stone, who later became editor of Universal Music Corporation.

Soon Bernard began to share his music with others, and a lifetime of musical accomplishments was beginning. "I wrote compositions for my high school band, chorus and orchestra, and played piano in swing bands on weekends at church halls and even in clubs, even though I was under-age".

After high school Bernard attended Eastman School of Music in Rochester NY where he majored in composition and studied conducting and theory. Bernard was highly advanced in theory due to his previous studies and in 1957 he received a Bachelor's degree, later followed by a Master's in 1958. "I don't recall any period in my life up to that time when I wasn't writing music in one form or another" states Bernard.

Thundercats was the creation of Rankin/Bass productions, a company formed in 1961 by Arthur Rankin JR and Jules Bass. Bernard's association with the company began during the late 1960's when he was a freelance pianist and arranger working at 'Associated Recording', a studio in New York where publishers made demos to present to singers for recording.

From making demos over a period of years, Bernard graduated to playing piano on Maury Laws' sessions for holiday specials, and later ghosting charts for them. After a while he got to score all the action music for 'The Return of the King' and other TV films: 'The Ivory Ape' and 'The Sins of Dorian Gray' to name but a few. He also scored the TV specials 'The Easter Bunny is coming to town' with Fred Astaire, and 'The Stingiest Man in Town' with Walter Matthau.

At the beginning of the 1980s Bernard was already among the top writers of music for advertising in New York, having scored literally hundreds of jingles and TV adverts for all types of products, and was well acquainted with the best musicians in the New York and Toronto recording scene. "I also had the theme for the most prestigious news program on television, 'The MacNeil/Lehrer Report' on PBS".

In 1984 Bernard, now approaching 50, was asked to produce a complete musical score for a new animated series to be produced by the company. Bernard had already established himself as a good writer of action music and was officially commissioned to write the music for the *Thundercats* series. "I was given a set of drawings of the main characters and a dummy script" recalls Bernard. "I was then instructed to write themes for all the characters".

Bernard's main point of contact with Rankin/Bass was Lee Dannacher, executive producer of the show. Right from the beginning everyone involved in the program's creation were all confident about the direction the show's music should take. There was a discussion about musical style. "Contemporary, not kiddy" insists Bernard, and he continues "the production team also settled on the idea of using leitmotifs, the Wagnerian device delineating themes for each character or course of action. We were in complete agreement as to the use of this method".

As Bernard began his work scoring *Thundercats* he started tackling the job of creating a unique and powerful theme for each of the lead characters. Once his ideas were transferred to the written page in the form of lead sheets, he played all the key character themes on Piano and performed this (singing where necessary), live in front of the show's executives. After these were accepted Bernard was given a cue sheet by the production crew that detailed the timings, and loose descriptions of over 200 cues.

In the days before computer based music editing was commonplace. All of the *Thundercats* music had to be divided into time edits. Therefore the same key theme would be replayed by the orchestra multiple times. Each time Bernard had to restructure the same piece to allow it to work as a short 'sting' or 'ident' as well as for large musical action sequences. "I am very structural in my musical thinking, coming from my classical training" acknowledges Bernard, "I tried to structure each time segment as if it was a complete piece of music. If this were done today, with the use of pro-tools or other digital editing programs, these separate timing segments of each theme would no longer be necessary".

Once Bernard had been fully briefed on all the logistics of the series, his work began.

"The creative process is simple - not mysterious or mystical, you just start to work!". Given three months to write the first set of cues, Bernard was methodical in his approach and allocated himself the task of writing a set amount of new music every day, despite the fact he was also still heavily involved in other TV advertising work at the time.

The process of writing music for television or films present a musician with a whole set of different challenges when compared with concert music. Being accomplished at both Bernard was able to skillfully compose a complete work of music that both complemented the visual

action sequences, and enhanced them. “TV and film music is subservient to the structure and tone of the film” says Bernard, “Concert music is structured from indigenous ideas decided upon by the composer or derived from the music itself. Film & TV music always depends on instructions from non-musical sources. It has always been my philosophy when writing TV themes that if you are in another room and you hear the TV you will know what program is on by the sound of the music. Whether it is a film, news show, or just an ad, the principle is the same”.

Once Bernard’s music was written and approved recording began in June 1984 at ‘Associated Recording Studio’ on West 48th Street in New York. 20 orchestral musicians were assembled to record the musical score. Separate sessions were then later prepared for synthesizer overdubs.

Once recording was completed the finished tracks were handed to the *Thundercats* editors and over the next few months the musical score was finally placed alongside the stunning animated visuals. Needless to say the finished result was, quite literally a work of art. Bernard had managed to provide a brilliant array of themes. From the catchy and melodic Theme Tune to the dulcet tones of the decaying villain Mummra. The *Thundercats* music reflected perfectly the mood of any given episode. As soon as the music played on screen, the viewer instantly knew what was to come. Were the *Thundercats* winning? Were the Mutants of Plundarr going to reign victorious? Every plot point could be predicted and realized by the music.

Amongst such a varied body of work, it is difficult to single out one particular theme but Bernard is most proud of the Thundertank music. The idea of this came from the feel of a song by the group Three Dog Night”. This particular track’s combination of powerful electric guitar melody and upbeat tempo has to place it amongst the most powerful and memorable parts of the entire music score.

Thundercats began transmission in 1985 and the world was finally introduced to the feline band of heroes. The show became a massive success from the beginning, and Bernard was suitably impressed with not only his own work but the combination of skills that culminated in the finished *Thundercats* episodes being broadcast. Bernard was also impressed with how the music and sound editors had decided to use and mix his music. “The editors were hip, imaginative and sensational and had a terrific sense of the use of music”.

The *Thundercats* franchise went from strength to strength from 1985 onwards. With more episodes being constantly written, animated and directed. Happy with the broad range of musical accompaniment Bernard Hoffer had given the *Thundercats* production team, no new music was required at first, though 2 years later, a second series of *Thundercats* was being produced, and once again Bernard’s skills were called upon.

Although the cues recorded for the first series of the show were comprehensive, after 65 episodes, the editors and production team were looking forward to some new music to reflect the changing storylines and characters within the *Thundercats* show. Bernard was once again commissioned to write a similar body of music, which would work alongside, not replace the existing music. “There was a new set of characters, and a new cue sheet describing the ideas and length of the cues. The process was the same” recalls Bernard.

On a personal note Bernard Hoffer has extremely high regard for the *Thundercats* show. Aside from the opportunities it presented him, he is very proud to have played a part in countless childhood memories. “*Thundercats* was one of the most ideal projects a composer could wish for” declares Bernard. “All the people involved knew what they were doing with music. Nobody nitpicked; I was given almost complete freedom to write what I pleased after I was given the guidelines”.

Bernard cannot speak too highly of the *Thundercats* production team and its employees. “I was given sufficient time to do the job right. I was given the choice of the musicians I wanted and I don't think more than 2 or 3 cues (out of several hundred) were ever rejected. Working with Rankin/Bass was always a good experience. You couldn't ask for better conditions”.

20 years after the first episodes of *Thundercats* roared onto television screens across the world, the show continues to expand its massive fan base. With the release of the show on DVD a whole new generation can enjoy the animated adventures of the *Thundercats* series.

Bernard continues to create music at the age of 70 and he is today involved with several concert projects both classical and Jazz and currently has 3 CDs of saxophone music available on the ‘Sons of Sound’ label. These include ‘Variations on a Theme of Stravinsky’, ‘Suite after Baroque Styles’ and ‘The Toy Chest’.

With constant rumours of a new *Thundercats* series in development Bernard is doubtful he would be reunited with the show's production team. “I would probably not do any TV work again unless it was a very special movie” says Bernard. “I'm not interested in short term deadlines. If *Thundercats* were to be redone it would be a very different production, since Rankin/Bass doesn't exist as an entity and some of the actors have passed away. All of the production team are dispersed all over the world!”

Identifying why the *Thundercats* series was such a success is impossible. If it were obvious, undoubtedly every television executive and commissioning editor would surely have success after success on their hands. “I think *Thundercats* was a good idea from the beginning and was

well executed in all of its elements” concludes Bernard. “Also the clear definition of good guys versus bad guys (good guys always win) made it clearly identifiable to young people. Many other programs don't have clearly recognizable elements. The characters were well defined, the animation was well defined, and if I may say so the music was well defined. Also the repertory groups of actors were first class. And there were a bunch of young, very hip, editors with lots of imagination. Probably what happens with any successful work of art or entertainment is that all the elements come together in just the right manner”.

Upon reflection the *Thundercats* music is still remembered for two main reasons. Firstly it is set inside the mind of every young child who watched it. Like an old toy or photograph, music conjures images of the past, and it revives our memories of childhood action and adventure. Secondly the music is far superior to many of its contemporaries and it is rare indeed to find a set of Television scores that transcend mere background accompaniment. Even today this cartoon series, made originally for children over 20 years ago, cannot fail to command the complete respect and attention of the listener and there are no sign of it fading into obscurity.